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AMAR JIBAN (MY LIFE)

by

Rassundari Devi

The complete and unabridged translation
of the Bengali text
With original introductions by
Jyotirindranath Tagore and Dinesh Chandra Sen

translated by

ENAKSHI CHATTERJEE

Rassundari Devi

AMAR JIBAN (MY LIFE)

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Two birds sit
on the golden bough
of the pippala tree.
One eats
the sweet fruit.
The other watches.
Both are happy.
One is happier.
Which?

Śvetāśvatara
Upaniṣad IV : 6

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RASSUNDARI DEVI OR DASI?

This translation follows the 1987 College Street edition of the Bengali text. In the Bengali original the writer's name appears as Rassundari Dasi. It was not customary in those days for women to use surnames. It had to be either Devi for the Brahmins or Dasi for the rest. But Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's anthology—*Women Writing in India* (Volume 1)—has given her a Devi status, perhaps unknowingly. Though incorrect, this name has not been changed in this translated version as Rassundari has already been projected to a wider public as Devi. Any change at this stage from Devi to Dasi would only create confusion.

Rassundari writes that she was born in Chaitra 1216, corresponding to March/April 1810. She states that her book was first printed in 1868 (=1275, see page 74), but no such edition seems to have surfaced so far. The earliest extant one, of the first part only, dates to 1875. She certainly revised Part I later, because the complete text in its present form, including Part II, contains references in Part I to her older years.

The family Tree of Rassundari Devi

Padmalochan Ray

↓

Rassundari = Sitanath Sarkar (Sikdar

↓

Kishorilal

↓

Saralabala = Sarat Chandra Sarkar

↓

Nirjharini = Prafulla Chandra Sarkar.
(co-founder of Ananda Bazar Patrika)

↓

Ashoke = Aloka

↓

Aveek = Rakhi

THE TRANSLATOR



Enakshi Chatterjee is a bi-lingual writer, translator and media-critic. She has rendered into English a wide range of modern Bengali fiction and poetry including works of Tarasankar, Premendra Mitra, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Santosh Kumar Ghosh, Narendra Nath Mitra, Samares Basu, Ramapada Choudhury, Ashapurna Devi, Moti Nandy, Vijoya Mukhopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay and many others. Her books have come out under the imprint of the Sahitya Akademi, the National Book Trust, Orient Longman, O.U.P., Vikas, Ananda Publishers, Kali for Women and WRITERS WORKSHOP, to name a few. Two titles, co-authored by her in the national biography series of the N.B.T., have been translated into seven Indian languages. She served as the Bengali co-ordinator of the three language Vak-Katha project and recceived the Katha translation award in 1993. Apart from her passion for translation she is deeply interested in history of science, popular science, science fiction and children's literature. She won the State award Rabindra Puraskar for the book *Paramanu Jijnasa* written jointly with her husband Santimay. Actively associated with the electronic media, she ran a T.V. review column in a major Bengali newspaper for more than ten years. She has been a broadcaster, telecaster, researcher and scriptwriter of documentaries.

JYOTIRINDRANATH TAGORE

Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1925) was one of the most versatile of the Tagore brothers. Musician, composer, painter, playwright, patron of women's education, nationalist, he translated plays from French and Tilak's *Gita* from Marathi.

DINESH CHANDRA SEN

Rai Bahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939) has been called a scholar of epic proportions. In a career spanning 50 years he produced 60 volumes of scholarly work. He toured villages to collect handwritten manuscripts. Chiefly known for his 8-volume *Folk Tales and Ballads of East Bengal, The Vaishnava Literature of Bengal, Chaitanya and His Age,* Sen also helped Sir Asutosh Mookerjee in organizing the Department of Modern Indian Languages at the Calcutta University.



Parts of the third, fourth, fifth and sixth compositions were published in *Women Writing in India: 6000 B C to the Present* (Volume 1) edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (The Feminist Press, The City Uuiversity of New York. New York, 1991). I am grateful to Susie Tharu for introducing me to the unique world of Rassundari.



Preface

The book is written by a woman. What is more, it is written by one fairly advanced in age and old fashioned—in fact of 88 years. That was what aroused my curiosity and induced me to go through it. I had intended only to underline interesting observations. But as I went on, the pages became full of pencil marks. Actually the events of her life are so wonderful and her style has such a natural simplicity and charm that it is difficult to put the book down.

From the autobiography we get the impression that the writer is an ideal woman. She is as adept at housework as she is religious and God-loving. She was very timid as a child. Her mother had taught her a prayer to help her get over her fearfulness. Those words remained a source of strength all her life. "If you ever feel frightened think of God, the kind Dayamadhav," her mother had advised her. She held on to this through the ups and downs of life. These days a great deal of fuss is being made about religious education. The truth of the matter is that the best result is obtained if the seeds of spiritual values are sown by the mother very early in life. No amount of reading of the scriptures later can match this. Another point to note about the author's life is her earnest desire to educate herself.

Such opportunity however was beyond her reach. It was considered improper for women to learn reading and and writing those days. But she taught herself, taking great pains, and overcoming many obstacles. Her

motivation was a thirst for spiritual knowledge. It was her wish to read the scriptures—the *Chaitanya Bhagabata*—and not a desire to read plays and novels, that prompted her to do this.

Religion for her was not outward ritual but a living spiritual experience. She discovered the presence and kindness of God in every event. Her total dependence on and complete immersion in God indicate an advanced state of spirituality which is very rare to find. The images of various deities that we have in our country are actually symbols—not idolatry. Idol worship of the Hindus is very different from what is meant by the Christians in their attempt to denigrate the Hindus. This is amply illustrated by the advice given to the author by her mother regarding God.

"I asked her, 'But mother how could Dayamadhav hear us from inside the building?' She said: 'He is almighty God, He is everywhere, that is why He can hear us all. God has created us. He is able to hear the call from anyone from any place—if you call Him loudly or softly or just think of Him. That is because He is no ordinary person, He is God.' Then I asked her: 'Mother—the God others talk about, do you mean we have the same God?' Mother replied: 'Of course, there is only one God and He belongs to each and every one. He is the creator, creator of all the objects of the world and loves us all. He is God to each and every one of us.'"

Can there be a loftier concept of the divine? Every householder should have a copy of this book. Such excellence is very rarely found.

SRI JYOTIRINDRANATH TAGORE



The author has stated in the preface, "I was born in the month of Chaitra in the (Bengali) year 1216 and now in 1303 I am 88 years of age."

The account of this life can hardly be ignored as merely personal. It is a factual document of the life of an old Hindu woman. Anyone speaking of his or her life in a simple style is actually recording the social scene without being aware of it. The book *Amar Jiban* is thus not merely the account of Rassundari but a story of all Hindu women of her time. We do not have a second book of this kind in our Bengali literature where the situation of women is so exactly and frankly drawn. Come to think of it—if this book had not been written, an entire chapter of Bengali literature would had remained incomplete.

This presentation is particularly valuable because in Hindu society housewives are no longer in the same position which they used to occupy. If Rassundari or someone else like her had not articulated her experiences at this late stage in her life there would have been no way of knowing this. We have yet to read a clearer and more vivid account of a woman's gradual development in an atmosphere full of nervousness, apprehensions and superstitions of a village society. This indeed seems to be the only authentic way of learning how the length of the veil over the face gradually receded till it touched the sindoor at the parting, how she evolved into the role of the goddess Annapurna, how she grew from a daughter to a new bride, from a bride to the mistress of the house and eventually to a mother.

Poets are usually in the habit of making love the

central theme round which feminine characters are depicted. But a Hindu home is not just the home of the husband and wife. The woman of the house receives no appreciation unless she excels also as a daughter, sister, sister-in-law, daughter-in-law and a mistress. Yet poets tend to isolate her from her total background and paint her merely as a love-object. We hardly ever get to see her as a complete person in fiction and poetry. Her natural reticence has prevented Rassundari from dwelling on her own love-life though other facts of her life stand out in double clarity. She has started from where poets and novelists leave off, I wonder if any male writer however talented could have alluded to the depths of a woman's heart the way she has done.

In those days women used to be completely oppressed in society. It is difficult to imagine in the present age of waywardness how scared they used to be of the opinion of others. It was not just the fear of what others would say, but the very idea of how critics would wag their tongues if even a part of her face was visible made her withdraw farther—such things are difficult to visualise now. The elders would blush with embarrassment if they happened to know of a woman's attempts to read and write. She could not ask for food when hungry—she was a silent model of the patience and sacrifice of the traditional Hindu wife. One is naturally curious to know how her mind worked, what were her thoughts as she looked back over the long years already spent, about her spiritual leanings and various other matters. Rassundari has amply satisfied that curiosity.

We will now try to give some glimpses of her life. The *Amarkosh* gives the word "timid" as one of the synonyms for woman. That name was quite apt as far as Rassundari was concerned. As a child she was constantly obsessed with fear. As a little girl she had heard that child-lifters take away boys and girls fighting with others. The thought of child lifters scared her to death: "If a boy

ever hit me I was afraid to cry out, but the thought that he would be kidnapped made me shed silent tears." The very thought used to fill her with tears. One of her companions saw her in this state and taunted, "Look at her, the sissy, there she goes again, and pecked me on the cheeks". Another day, she mistook a veterinary doctor to be a child-lifter and "was half-dead with fright, I was so scared that I covered my eyes and began to tremble". It was not just the fear of kidnappers but other fears too. One day she had gone to the river bank with two of her younger brothers, when one of them pointed out "'This looks like a creamating ground—look there is a bed in which they carry the dead'-The very word dead numbed me, I was overwhelmed with fright". In her advanced years Rassundari felt grateful to God and said, "I used to tremble with fear all the time, who has put the fear in me and by whose strength I was able to overcome it?"

Everybody knew that she would be too afraid to report an assault. "They all knew I would not tell anyone, I was afraid of all the girls—and they used to beat me when others were not around." One day one of the playmates pretended to be her child and ate up all her snacks. Then she said, "wash my face." There was no water nearby so Rassundari could not oblige her. On this "the other girl slapped me hard. I began to tremble in fear. Tears streamed down my cheeks." Another playmate who happened to be there charged the assaulter—"Shame on you,—you have eaten all her food even the two mangoes and on the top of that you are making her cry. I am going to tell her mother." This upset the little girl even more. Through all these childish pranks we get the portrait of the eternal Bengali woman, patient and forgiving. Rassundari had striking good looks—at the age of eighty-eight she felt no qualm to admitting this.

Rassundari has not whitewashed her weaknesses to focus on her virtues. In one instance she appeals to God—

"Please bring my transgressions to light in case I have concealed them. If I forgot something, do remind me. I have never attempted to cheat in word or deed."

She used to be called a stupid girl in her childhood. In fact some of her actions at the age of twenty-five provoke laughter. But she has been quite frank relating them. One day she with her two brothers had strayed to the riverside, they were in trouble. Her mother had taught them to recite the name of their deity Dayamadhav when in danger. Dayamadhav was the family deity. In distress the girl cried out, "Brother, call Dayamadhav". So all three of us began them shout lustily—"Dayamadhav! Dayamadhav!" A passer-by heard them and very kindly took them home. Next day the little girl mentioned this to her younger brother, "You know Dayamadhav took us in his arms and brought us home" The brother said, "What are you saying Didi? Is Dayamadhav a human being? Does he have a beard?" To settle the matter they went to their mother. She laughed and said to Rassundari, "Even your younger brother understands it, but you don't—you silly girl."

The little girl had learnt from her mother about the way God always helps people. This faith was operative all her life and it controlled and determined her future life. Her mother had explained, "The deity Dayamadhav had certainly heard your cry, So He sent a man to bring you home."

She has also described other examples of her naiveté. "When I was about eight or nine—people used to pull my leg saying your mother is not married. I was stupid enough to believe them. Even when I was twenty-five I had some traces of that stupidity left in me." In her in-laws' house there was a horse named Joyhari. "One day my eldest son came in riding that horse. He brought the horse to the inner courtyard for me to see. Some said this horse belongs to the master. Others said look how nicely he is riding. I was inside the room and learned that the horse

belonged to my husband. How can I come out before the horse I wondered—he belongs to the master of the house. Suppose the horse looks at me—that would be most embarrassing."

Rassundari was married at the age of twelve when she had no idea of what marriage meant. She was brought up with love and care. One day she learnt that her mother was giving her away. This pained her a great deal. She went to her mother and asked her, "If somebody wants me would you hand me over?" Her mother protested, "Of course not, my dear, who should I give you to? Who has said this?" But preparations for the wedding began—and the girl felt delighted with all the music and rituals little realising that all these would lead to her permanent expatriation.

The wedding over, the groom's party was getting ready to leave in grand style. "I thought that the people who had come are now going away. So I followed my mother about in high spirits—I noticed some were very happy, others were in tears. It gave me a shock. Gradually my elder brothers, aunts, mother all took me in their arms and started sobbing.

Since they were crying I too began to whimper. There was no doubt in my mind that my mother was going to hand me over to these people right away. I held her tightly and appealed, "Don't give me away mother." This moved everybody to tears. My mother picked me up and tried to explain, "You are my good girl, you understand everything, God is with us, so don't cry. We are going to have you back in a few days." But that time I was thoroughly shaken, shivers went through me. Somehow I could ask in a choked voice, "Ma is God going with me?"

The village of Ramdia—the home of her in-laws was a three days journey by boat. The day they were supposed to reach she heard everyone on the boat saying, "We are reaching home today". She thought that it was her home

they were referring to. But that night when they landed and she found out her mistake "my heart broke. Tears flowed incessantly."

Going to the in-laws no longer provokes such tearful farewell scenes. But this is a true picture of the time past. Ancient songs and poems are replete with such sad themes. These sketches remind one of those tear-soaked songs like "How have you been dear Uma in the house of the destitute Hara," "Rani rushed out with her hair undone to receive Uma" etc. These accounts make us appreciate the feeling of a mother missing her daughter. One can visualise the tear-stained face of the mother and realise the extent of her worry. The entire neighbourhood used to share the grief of sending a very young girl, almost a child, to another home when she was utterly vulnerable and unable to protest. But such scenes are things of the past though we treasure that memory.

The girl with moist eyes used to pine for her own people in her husband's home. "Anything which had any connection with my home, be it a bird, a cat or a tree would make me cry. During such times my mother-in-law used to draw me close to her and reassure me.

"It seemed to me like the arms of my own mother. Her affectionate words made me feel as though she was my own mother. But she looked very different. She was dark and in no way like my mother who was very beautiful. When she took me in her arms I used to close my eyes trying to think of her as my own mother."

"Was it not wonderful", says Rassundari—"the bark of one tree grafted to another. As days went by I began to accept their authority like a pet bird."

At her parents' home Rassundari was the apple of their eye, she was not allowed to do any housework. But she got her training from a distantly related aunt whom she used to visit quite often. The aunt was too sickly to do the household chores and Rassundari used to help her out. She

was massaging oil in the aunt's hair one day when her own pishi happened to drop in. Rassundari fled from the room, lest her pishi should disapprove of the work she was engaged in. Her fears proved to be ill-founded. Her mother was delighted when the news reached her. She took her daughter in her arms and said, "How did you learn all these my dear? Would you mind showing us?"

What was learnt in fun was soon needed to perform a major duty. The entire responsibility of running the big household of her husband's family fell on her when she was in her early youth. "It could hardly be called a small family, in fact it was huge. There was a family deity and the offering of cooked rice and vegetables was a daily ritual. Guests dropped in often, strangers stopped by—they were all given provisions from the store. The amount of cooking to be done was no small matter. My husband did not have any brother but the domestic helps numbered about twenty-six. They were given two meals a day which I had to cook. My mother-in-law had lost her vision in the meantime so looking after her was my highest priority." Custom demanded that the daughter-in-law would work with the sari pulled down to cover her face and not talk to anyone. The clothes in those days were rather coarse, not fine as we have now. "Dressed in those material I used to work with the sari drawn down to my breast and never talk to the servants . . . Thus all I could see was my own feet, nothing else."

DINESH CHANDRA SEN

Amar Jiban



INVOCATION

I pay my homage to you mother Saraswati
The giver of strength and wisdom
To whom all the heavenly singers owe allegiance
Be kind enough to dwell in the seat of my heart
I will honour you to the best of my ability.

I am your weak and ignorant daughter, do oblige
So that my wishes are fulfilled.
I earnestly hope that you will dwell in my voice
Along with your beloved spouse.

FIRST COMPOSITION

An Account of my Life

Where are you god Visweswara who grant the wishes of all
Grant me my wish, come occupy my heart
I am ignorant and mean and a woman at that
What power do I have to describe your glory
Yet I have an earnest desire to sing your praise
Your are gracious, be kind to poor Rassundari.

I was born in the month of Chaitra in the year 1216, and now in 1303 I am 88 years old. I have spent such a long time in Bharatvarsha.

My body, my mind in fact my entire life have gone through several phases. I do not exactly remember how my days were spent during each phase. I am writing whatever I recall. . .

I had no idea of my physical and mental condition till I was four or five years old; my mother knew all about it. However I can recall something of the time when I was six or seven. I am putting down whatever I remember. I used to play with the neighbourhood girls. The girls used to beat me up for no reason at all. But I used to be so scared that I did not cry loudly though tears used to stream down my cheeks. I wept partly because of my physical pain but specially because my people at home would scold the girl. There was another reason for my tears. My mother once asked me not to go anywhere. I asked her, "Why, mother? Why should I not go anywhere?" "There is a wicked man in town," she said; "he is a child lifter and carries a huge bag in which he puts small children if he finds them." These words of my mother frightened me so much that all the blood drained from my face. When my mother saw these symptoms of fright she picked me up in her arms and tried to cheer me up. "God bless you, you need not have any fear. That kidnapper takes away only those children who

are naughty and fight with others. You need not be afraid, he can't possibly take you."

These words of my mother continued to haunt me. I used to remember these words whenever I was hit by one of the boys. My mother told me that the kidnapper takes away those boys who hit others. That is why I did not dare raise my voice whenever beaten. The thought that this boy would be taken away made me weep. I never told any one that I had been beaten. I was afraid to cry lest others should come to know it. My companions knew that ragging would never be reported. I was afraid of all my companions. And they used to beat me for no reason. Nobody ever came to know of it.

One day, one of the girls whispered to me, "Go and ask your mother for some refreshments. Let us both go for a bath in the Ganga." I was delighted and promptly went to mother. "Mother," I said to her, "I would like to go for a bath in the Ganga." My mother smiled and said, "That is a good idea, is there any thing you'd like to take?" I said I want a bundle. Actually I knew nothing about what that meant, I only knew that when people went for a dip in the Ganga they sat by the roadside, had something to eat and carried a bundle on their head as they walked. My mother understood what I meant and packed me some food and two mangoes. I was beyond myself with happiness. It was as if rare riches had been handed over to me. These days I do not feel the same pleasure for something a hundred times more gratifying—oh those were the days! So happy! Then I went on my way to the Ganga equipped with the bundle along with my companion. A little later we sat by a tank and opened the packet. The other girl suggested that we play a game of mother and child. I was to take her on my lap and feed her. I said, "Very well, you come close to me." She did that. I said, "Start eating now" and by and by I fed her everything that was in the packet. Then she demanded to be washed. I was in a fix,

I did not know what to do. I went down the steps but could not manage to bring any water up. I tried hard, but without success. This drew a big slap from my companion. I shook in fear and wept profusely. I wiped my tears with both hands and looked this way and that lest somebody should see that I had been given a slap.

Another of my playmates happened to be there at that time. She admonished my companion, "How very wicked of you," she said. "You ate up her food, and also the mangoes, and you have slapped her: I'll go and tell her mother everything". . . She went over to our house to report and came back to me again. She said, "I have told your mother everything. See what she does to you." These words frightened me so much that I started to cry. My other companion who had accompanied me to the Ganga remarked, "Look at her, the sissy, there she goes again", and pecked me on the cheek. Frightened, I wiped my tears and began to think. So I have become a very silly girl, that must be a terrible thing. The kidnapper is sure to grab me, and perhaps he will take my companion also. I was afraid to go back home, so I went to my companion's home instead. Her mother looked at me and asked her, "Why is she all red in the face? You must have teased her. "Her mother scolded her but she only laughed. After her mother left us she said, "My mother scolded me but that did not make me cry like you. You are a cry-baby. Are you going to tell your mother everything?" I shook my head and said "No. I am not going to tell mother anything. . ." I felt very sad and sat there for some time. A little later someone from my home came to fetch me. When I went home, I found everyone making fun of that incident." Have you had your dip in the Ganga?" They asked me and shook with laughter. My uncle, my brother and others said that she should not be allowed to play with those girls. "From to-morrow let her come and stay in the outer house." In those days children did not go to school. There was a

Bengali school in our house. All the boys of the village used to come there to study. There was an English lady who used to teach them. Next day my uncle took me to the teacher and I was asked to sit next to her. I had a black skirt and a scarf. I used to sit very still, too afraid to leave my seat. I was eight years old then. I cannot say what I looked like but I can repeat what others used to say to describe my features.

My complexion used to be fair and bright
And I had a figure to match
My hands and feet were
well proportioned
People used to call me a
golden doll.

I never talked to anyone. The words coming out of my mouth were not distinct. People used to laugh at my words. If somebody shouted at me, I felt like crying. Shouts made me shed tears. For this reason nobody spoke to me sharply. I used to stay inside the school room the whole day. I was not kept inside the inner house like other girls. The boys used to write the thirty-four letters of the alphabet on the floor and read them loudly. Since I used to be there all the time I learned all the letters by myself. But nobody had any knowledge of this. My family members kept me at the outer house the whole day. I was taken in only for my bath and lunch. After lunch I was again taken to the outer house and allowed to go in before evening. Thus throughout the day I stayed near the English woman in the shcool. I was in no condition to understand what went on in my mind. My mind was obsessed with fear. Fear did not let me open up.

SECOND COMPOSTION

Blessed you are Lord in the three worlds
I can never thank you enough as I have
Just one voice
Blessed is your mercy, blessed are your laws
Blessed is your Maya which covers the entire world
Blessed are your wonderful creations
Your ways are uniqne, blessed is the earth.
Blessed are birds, and trees.
The earth is so brilliant and varied
A refreshing wind blows over it all.
Hundreds of rivers like the Ganga go their ways
Fragrant with smell and so much more
Blessed is Rassundari to be born
and to hear your name sweet as nectar.

One day as my uncle was taking me inside the house I saw a man, a veterinary doctor coming with a huge sack. I thought he was a kidnapper. I was half-dead with fright and I was so scared that I covered my eyes and began to tremble. Everybody present there tried to tell me that I need not be afraid. They found it to be hilarious and burst into laughter. My uncle took me in him arms, went inside the house and said with a grin, "You know we were almost caught by a kidnapper." This amused everybody and they all started laughing.

I ran to my mother sobbing. My mother picked me up and tried to reassure me, "Why are you afraid," she tried to reason. "There is nothing to fear. There is no such person as a kidnapper, these are all lies. We have Dayamadhav, so don't worry, whenever you feel scared call Dayamadhav and all your fears will disappear." These words of my mother gave me courage. I was convinced that there was no kidnapper and we have our Dayamadhav. This thought pacified me to some extent But I never went anywhere without an escort. I was a particularly frightened

child unlike anyone else my age. Even the sight of old people would make me jittery, so I was never left unattended. I had an aunt who became a widow shortly after her marriage, I had no idea of this. I had once asked her, "Pishi why don't you have the conchshell bangles and other ornaments?" Pishi replied. "I am not married, that is why." I was convinced by her words. I used to think that all the widows in our family were actually unmarried. I lost my father when I was four years old. But I did not know anything about this. One day as I was sitting next to the English teacher of our school a gentleman came over and saw me. He asked my uncle. "Rai Mahashay, you seem to have brightened the assembly with a decorated pot." He wanted to know whose daughter I was. My uncle replied "She is the daughter of Padmalochan Rai." This remark upset me greatly. All these days I was under the impression that I was my mother's daughter. However I was convinced that my mother was not married. The more I brooded over this the sadder I became. After going back I asked my mother—"Ma whose daughter am I?" My mother merely laughed but did not say anything. When I went to my pishi I asked, "Pishi whose daughter am I?" To my utter surprise pishi began to cry. I did not understand why she was crying. After a while she checked herself and said, "God, how could you be so cruel. This innocent child has no idea of a father's love." She took me in her arms and said, "Don't you know whose daughter you are? Your father was Padmalochan Rai." I was quiet for some time though I was still in the dark and my worries persisted. Then I asked, "Pishi, how can I be the daughter of Padmalochan Rai?" She laughed and said, "Stupid girl, don't you understand anything. Come, let me explain. Your father married your mother and brought her here. That is why you are his his daughter."

But this only increased my apprehension. I pondered for some time then asked again, "But where has he gone?

Pishi said, "Do not speak of it my dear child, he is dead." I was very scared to hear of death. I remembered what my mother had advised me, to pray to Dayamadhav whenever I was afraid. I decided to think of Dayamadhav if I chanced to come across any dead person.

One night a fire broke out in a house close to ours. All three of us were very young. I had a brother, two years older than me and another two years younger. There was a large field adjacent to our house. It was a bare stretch with no trees and habitation. There was the river about two miles away. Everybody was bringing out their household goods to save them from the fire. The three of us were also dragged out of the hose and kept in the open field. The house was engulfed in the soaring flame. The people shouted, some cried, the bamboo rafters cracked, there was a great deal of noise. All three of us started to cry. The fire spread to our house. We thought we would be burnt to death. We started running in the field crying all the time. From time to time we looked back and found that the fire was still raging. We ran even faster. It is impossible to describe the situation we were in. We were panic-stricken.

We stood by the bank of the river. The entire area seemed to be a burning ghat—cots, pillows, mattresses, mats, bamboo, logs of wood were scattered everywhere. Nobody was around except the three of us. Meanwhile my elder brother said, "This looks like a burning ghat, those are the beds of the dead." The word death made me shake with fear. I was overcome with a sense of tremendous fear.

All three of us were afraid for our lives and we started to cry. Suddenly I remembered what my mother had said. "Call Dayamadhav if you are afraid." So I told my brothers "Please call Dayamadhav." All three of us began to shout and cry "Kind Dayamadhav! Dayamadhav!" But it was hardly possible for anyone to hear us. With the river on one side and the cracking sound of the flames people

were shouting in desperation who had the time to listen to us. Besides we were standing on a lonely spot. I can not describe how frightened we were. We were almost half-dead with fear, but we we kept on chanting the name of the kind Dayamadhav.

The sight of the fire had brought some people living on the other side of the river to this side. They crossed the river at a point where the water was shallow. They heard us. One said "Whose children are these crying near the river bank?" Another man said "They must be from the house of Rai Mahasaya. The house has caught fire." They picked us up and went on to watch the fire telling us all the while that there was nothing to worry.

Meanwhile the members of our family had taken us to be dead and were weeping and wailing, rolling on the ground. Then we appeared accompanied by those people. Our family members at once took us in their arms and danced about happily. The idea that the children were burnt to death had so shocked them that nothing had been taken out of the house, doors, windows everything was reduced to ashes But they did not mind the loss because they were overjoyed to have us back. We were sent to another house to spend the night. Next morning we found that most of our house had been burnt down. Charred remains of various objects were lying around in heaps. Egg plants, fruits—even rows of bananas stood scorched in the trees. Broken pots and pans were lying about. The sight delighted me because I could play with those burnt pots and pans. Custom demanded that a meal of rice be offered on a burnt home. We were also given some of that meal. The image of the Dayamadhav which we have installed in our home also received this offering. We were eating the rice meal when my younger brother said that this is due to the mercy of Dayamadhav. I am older, so naturally I should have been wiser but I knew for sure the that man who had brought us home from the bank of the river was none other than the

kind Dayamadhav.

I said to my younger brother, "Yes, Dayamadhav loves us. Yesterday he brought us home." My younger brother was scandalized. He said "What are you saying Didi? Is Dayamadhav a human being? Does he have a beard?" I said "Mother has told me to call for Dayamadhav in times of distress. Yesterday we were afraid and called him and so he has brought us home." My younger brother said, "That was a man, not Dayamadhav." This made me cry. My mother had come in in the mean time and said, "Why are you after her?" My brother gave all the details and my mother too started laughing, I could not understand why she was laughing. Then mother told me, "Even your younger brother understands it—but you don't, you silly girl. Come let me explain." She made me sit on her lap and began to explain.

THIRD COMPOSITION

I am ignorant of proper words to sing your praise
Growing old before my time dealing with material
matters
Over and above this I am weak and half-dead
Deprived of a glimpse of you.
I burn with shame and fear, what a bondage I am in,
dear God
I do not see a way out
I am your slave, I beseech you,
have mercy and appear in my heart
as quickly as you can

You are merciful and wish-fulfilling
Ocean of kindness, lord of the world
Rassundari is floating and lost in boundless
Waves without
the life boat of your mercy.

My mother explained to me that the deity we have in the house is called Dayamadhav—he is God. "The person who brought you home from the river bank was a human being." I said, "Ma, you had told me to call Dayamadhav whenever I felt frightened. Yesterday when we were afraid we called out Dayamadhav—Dayamadhav—why didn't he come?" My mother said "You were scared, you had wept and called him. Dayamadhav heard you and sent the man to bring you home." I asked her, "But mother how could Dayamadhav hear us from inside the building?" She said "He is almighty God, he is everywhere, that is why he can hear us all. God created us. He is able to hear the call from anyone from any place—if you call him loudly or softly or just think of him. That is because He is no ordinary person, He is God." Then I asked her, "Mother, the God others talk about—do you mean we have the same God?" Mother replied, "Of course there is only one God and He belongs to each and every one. He is the creator, creator of all objects of the world and loves us all. He is God to each and every one of us."

Actually I had no idea of what was meant by the word God. But I had heard people talk of God. "He knows what goes on in every mind," said my mother, "because he is divine." Mother's words gave me a lot of moral courage. Since that day I could begin to understand many things including the fact that the God people talk about happens to be our God as well. The thought gave me courage. If my words can reach him through my thoughts then I need not be afraid any more. Whenever I was scared I would think of him. These words of my mother made a permanent impression on my mind—Mother has said that God is with us.

Since that day the *mantra* given by my mother—the name of Parameswar had entered my heart. I used to play with girls of my age till the age of eight. The next two years I was allowed to sit next to the European lady

teacher in the class room of the outer house. So ten years went by. Then our house was destroyed by fire and the school was dismantled. That ended my venturing out to the outhouse. Now I was confined to the inner quarters. My maternal uncle had lost his house. My mother brought his baby son to our home. I was delighted, I used to take care of him the whole day, play with him, give him constant company. The child grew very attached to me. I loved him dearly, never let him out of sight, bathing, feeding, carrying him all the time. I never let him cry.

A distantly related *khura* (uncle) used to live very close to our house. There was a *khuri-ma* (aunt) too in that house. I used to spend the whole day with *khuri-ma* taking the child along. There were not many people in that house: three uncles, *khuri-ma* and a few children. *Khuri-ma's* arms and legs were badly affected by arthritis, but in spite of it she did all the household work. As I was her constant companion she used to lament to me, "I wish I was dead. I just can't cope with this work."

Khuri-ma's laments used to pain me very much. I had no experience in doing houeshold chores, but I felt sorry for her. . . . One day I told her, "You take some rest, let me do all the work for you." She said "But you don't know any housework." "If you show me," I answered, "I'll be able to do everything." "But I have never seen you doing any work," she said, "Do you know any housework? People will speak ill of me if they find that I am making you work." Then I said, "You need not tell anyone, you just show me and I will do all the work."

She directed me and I started working in high spirits. By and by I learnt to do all the work around the house from her. I used to make all the preparation and she would sit and do the cooking. Gradually I learnt how to cook. I used to cook for their entire family. Nobody at home knew about my prowess. *Khuri-ma* was very affectionate, and I stayed close to her.

The days went by. One day I was massaging oil into *Khuri-ma's* scalp when Pishi (father's sister) walked in. Instantly I rushed inside the room to hide. But Pishi saw me and asked why I was hiding from her. *Khuri-ma* explained, "You see she was rubbing oil in my head. She was afraid that you would admonish her, that is why she fled." My Pishi started laughing, she came in, picked me up in her arms and said, "So you can do housework now. Where did you learn?" *Khuri-ma* said "Your daughter is quite good at it. I can hardly move for my pains—it is she who does all my work. She has been a life-saver," Pishi was delighted, she picked me up and carried me to our house. She told everyone at home, "Do you know what a good worker our girl has become? She does all the work including cooking in that house because the lady there is almost disabled with arthritis. She herself has told me so." The people at home were very happy to hear this, my mother's happiness knew no bounds. She took me in her arms, said, "Very well, my dear, show us how good you are at housework." From then on I began to take part in household work. Actually my people did not allow me to work, I had to do it secretly. But they showered a good deal of affection on me when they saw what I had done. Thus my days of playing childhood games were gone, there were no more games for me, only household chores.

This was how I learnt all the work that needed to be done at home. For two years I spent my entire day with *Khuri-ma* and the child in the other house. The child grew very attached to me. I too could not let him go out of sight. Suddenly the child fell ill and died. His death plunged me into grief. I continued to stay with *Khuri-ma*. I had just completed twelve. This was how the first twelve years of my life were spent. During this period I was happy and carefree, protected by my mother and other members of my family.

Then worries began to creep in. I got married at the

age of twelve. I had gone for a bath in the backyard pond where many others were also present.. One of them saw me and remarked, "The man who will get this girl is indeed lucky—he has desired her for so long." Another added, "So many have already come for her, ready to take her, but her mother is not willing." Another person commented, "But she must give her away. She has to be given to someone, that is why she is born a woman." It caused me terrible anguish. I was absolutely taken aback. Back at home I charged my mother, "Mother if someone asks for me will you give me away?" "Bless my heart," said my mother, "Who shall I give you to? Who told you such stories? Where? How can I give you away?" Then my mother started wiping her tears as she went inside the room. I could see that she was crying. . . I was scared out of my wits. I began to worry about what would happen to me. Where was my mother going to send me! These thoughts caused so much misery that I was thoroughly depressed. I could not eat or talk or work. I felt miserable and felt like crying all the time. But I used to appeal to God with tears streaming down my cheeks. This constant worrying made me pale and emaciated. But I kept my thoughts to myself. Nobody knew about it except God. I had heard that everybody gets married but I did not know what marriage was all about. I only knew that people got married, but did not know anything about it. People just got married. You know you are going to get married. Everybody started telling me that. I was always treated well but the fact of the approaching marriage made me dearer to all of them.

That made me very happy indeed. I would be married. There would be music, I would hear the women ululating. How exciting that would be! Yet I felt scared at the same time. I cannot express the apprehensions that came to my mind. Meanwhile the various things necessary for the ceremonoy began to arrive. Relatives and guests began pouring in. I was scared to death by all this. I did not

talk to anyone and spent most of the time weeping. Everybody did their best to reassure me. They embraced me, but the unspoken agony in my mind did not lift.

Later I was cheered up by the ornaments, the red wedding sari, and the wedding music. I forgot my earlier worries and went about laughing and watching the elaborate preparations. My happiness knew no bounds. When everything was over the next day, I heard people asking my mother, "Are they leaving today?" I thought they were referring to the guests. Then the music started. There was an air of festivity. The guests must be leaving now, I thought. It made me happy and I went about following my mother. Presently everybody assembled inside the house. Some looked happy, but others were in tears. That made me feel really frightened. Then my brother, aunts, uncles, and my mother all took me in their arms by turn as they burst into tears. Their tears made me so sad that I began to cry too. I knew mother was going to hand me over to the other family. I tightened my hold on her and pleaded, "Don't give me over to them, Mother!" That made everybody present even more upset. They broke down and tried to say nice words to console me. My mother took me in her arms and said, "You are a good girl, you understand everything, don't you? God is with us, you needn't be afraid. You are going to come back to us in a few days' time. Every girl has to go to her in-laws' house. Nobody else cries like this. There is no reason to be so upset. Please calm down and talk to me." But I was trembling all over with fear. I was quite unable to speak. Somehow I managed to say through my tears: "Are you sure that Parameswar will go with me?" Mother promptly reassured me that He most certainly would. "He will be with you all the time, so stop crying now." But, in spite of her soothing words, my apprehensions kept growing and I could not check my tears.

With great effort they took me away from my mother.

I still feel sad when I think of the state of mind I was in and the agony I went through. As a matter of fact, it is indeed a sad thing to leave one's parents, settle in some other place, and live under other people. A place where your parents are no longer your own. But such is the will of God, so it must be praiseworthy.

I clung to whoever came to pick me up and went on weeping incessantly. Everyone, old and young, was moved to tears. Eventually they managed to put me inside a palanquin, which was not the one intended for me. No sooner was I seated inside than the bearers started marching off. With none of my near ones close by I sank into a deep depression. Since there was no way out, I started praying through my tears: "Please be with me, God." If I am asked to describe my state of mind, I would say that it was very much like the sacrifical goat being dragged to the altar, the same hopeless situation, the same agonized screams. I could see none of my relatives near me. I was miserable, and in tears I kept calling for my mother. I also prayed with all my heart as mother had told me to. "If you ever feel afraid, think of God," she had said.

All these thoughts went through my mind as I sat weeping. Very soon I felt too parched to cry.

FOURTH COMPOSITION

O you Lord of the world, all-pervading, on
whom rests the world
God of the world you are everywhere.

Leaving the protection of my mother I appeal
to you in dire distress and fright.

I can't see my friends I feel so upset
Apprehension shakes the heart

I cried for my mother and you gave me refuge
Like a true mother.

When I was constantly seeking your favour
With a great deal of respect
Instantly you picked me up, wiped my tears
Have given me what I wanted
You are by me all the time, pulling me up from danger
Whenever I was in distress
But I have lost sight of your endless mercy
Shame, shame on my life!

Unable to cry any more I fell into deep sleep. I had no idea what happened after that or where I was taken.

When I woke up the next morning I found myself on a boat with none of my relations near me. All the people who came and talked were strangers. I thought of my mother and other members of the family, the affectionate neighbours, my playmates. Where were they now and where was I? So I started to weep once again. My heart felt as if it would break. All the people in the boat tried to console me. But that increased my misery because their kind words reminded me of the affection of my own people. Tears streamed down endlessly—I just couldn't stop them. I cried till I was out of breath. Besides, the boat ride was a new experience and it made me feel sick. All I could do in my desperation was think of God, and I did that, though the predominant emotion I felt was fear. But Mother had said, "Speak the name of God if you are afraid." So I just kept on repeating the name of Parameswar.

Only God will understand the predicament I was in—nobody else can have any idea.

Even now I remember those days.

The caged bird, the fish caught in the net.

Since it was the will of God, however, it was no use feeling sorry for myself. I am only writing about what I felt at the time. I do not know how other girls feel.

Perhaps they do not feel as miserable as I did. Actually there are no obvious reasons for my sadness but the tears came constantly because I had to leave my own people.

People put birds in cages for their own amusement. Well, I was like a caged bird. And I would have to remain in this cage for life. I would never be freed. We spent a few more days on the boat. Then I heard people say that we were about to reach home. For one moment I thought they meant my home. It gave rise to mixed emotions and also to fear. God only knows what went through my mind. All I could do was cry—I spent all my days and nights crying.

Strange are the ways of God! Your laws are so wonderful! You have taken me from my dear mother and from others I love so much and have brought me to this distant place. That night we landed. We arrived at their house and saw different people taking part in all sorts of merrymaking. But none of them was from my part of the country. I did not know a single one of them. I began to weep again. I was so upset that the stream of tears did not cease. Everybody tried to assure me that this was my home—that all these people and everything that I saw were mine—and that I had no reason to cry. From now on I would have to live here and look after the house. There was no reason to be upset. But even as they spoke, my longing increased because I knew I wouldn't be able to see my family. Sorrow engulfed me like a raging forest fire. Those who have had such experiences perhaps know how useless words seem in times of sorrow. If somebody loses her son, is it wise to rebuke her? Or ask her not to lament, saying he must have been an enemy in an earlier birth: "He was not your son really. He wouldn't had left you if he had been so. He was a plunderer—don't ever utter his name. . . ." Such consolations are of no use. They never are, and particularly not when one is so disconcerted. Like feeding a raging fire such words only serve to aggravate

the grief. On the contrary, I was extremely frightened
hear such consolatory words. But I was not able to do
anything, there was no way. I continued to appeal to God
while tears streamed down my face. Then my mother-in-law
drew me towards her and tried to comfort me. I must
thank God for such a wonderful event! How strange are
the ways of God. He has put the bark of one tree to fit
another!

Her comforting arms seemed like my mother's arms.
Her affection made me feel as though she was my own
mother. She looked very different. My mother was very
beautiful. My mother-in-law was dark and she had no
other similarity with my mother. When she used to take
me in her arms I would close my eyes and imagine that
she was my mother. There was absolutely no reason to be
afraid or to cry. In fact the people here were more loving
and took greater care of me than I used to get at my parents'
place. They would not let me walk on the ground, I was
in the lap of the elders. Yet I was so afraid that I would
tremble all the time and shed tears. I used to call God all
the time: "Merciful God, dear father, I know how kind you
are. Because I was afraid, I used to appeal to you day and
night. I was not aware of the virtues associated with your
name. My mother had told me to remember God in case I
was afraid. That was the reason I used to call you desperately.
However, it is only by your grace that I thought of you
without knowing your great virtues.

"I have learnt that you are kind to those
Who call you in distress."

I stayed at my in-laws' place for three months. These
three months were spent weeping and crying as though I
was an orphan. After three months my uncle came to take
me home. Then I went to my mother, sat in her lap and
started crying saying, "Mother why did you give me away to
strangers?" My words seemed to amuse everybody present.
My mother tried to cheer me up and said, "Listen, everybody

goes to their in-laws, even younger girls, but nobody cries like you. When will God give you good sense? You must have cried a lot." Meanwhile, all my friends and relations came to see me. I was so delighted to see my own people, friends and playmates that I forgot all my woes. I seemed to float in a sea of happiness. It was indeed a happy day, I have no words to describe it. In those days I used to cry very easily but God had been kind enough to grant me joy as well. I spent my days happily in the company of the people I loved. There is no time like the time of childhood. I was twelve years old but I behaved like a five year old. I feel ashamed of myself. I had no sense at all, so everybody called me stupid. My uncle did not send me to my in-laws for one whole year. This period was spent near my mother without any worry. I had to return after one year. This time I stayed for two years at a stretch. I used to weep as before but gradually I was becoming acquainted with the residents of that house. But I never talked to anyone except God and that was a silent communication. I remembered my own people at home and cried. I was never without tears. Even dogs, cats birds and trees which reminded me of my parents' place, made me want to cry. I was a darling child at home. I never received any ill treatment which most young girls generally get. I was never beaten or scolded. I was loved by all. Later in a new surrounding as a new daughter-in-law I was given as much love. In fact, as a new bride I was showered with a great deal of affection. My mother-in-law used to give me all kinds of toys. Girls from the village were invited to give me company. I used to watch them play. Days passed in this manner. I was still pining for my home secretly but my stay at my in-laws' house had tamed me like a bird. I lived under their protection. My childhood days now seem insignificant though I have put everything down on paper.

Kind father, you are near me and dwell me in my

mind Yet I feel upset. I do not know why.

Where the Father is so merciful
One need not be afraid of anything
Since you are present, Father
I have no reason to be afraid
With your name in my heart
No evil can touch one
Where your name is chanted
No evil spirit can stay
Where your name is uttered
Everything turns to nectar.

There were nine maidservants in the house. One used to work inside the house, and eight worked outside. I was not given any work. My mother-in-law did the cooking. She did not allow me to do anything. I sat the whole day with the girls from the village to keep me company. The maidservants and these girls entertained me and we played together. I grew attached to them. I began to be as fond of them as I was of my friends in my parents' house. I was not in tears like before but I still did cry, though less frequently. I was not allowed to do any work; the whole day was spent uselessly. I used to wonder what there was for me to do. There were maidservants for all household work, there was my mother-in-law and others to help her. Girls were not taught to read and write in those days. There was nothing for me to do. Coins were not in use then, all transactions were conducted with cowries. I used to collect them and make various things like bouquets, lotus flowers, mirrors, umbrellas and clothes stands, and used to hang them in the room.

I used to make designs for stone moulds for making sweets; I also made jute hangers and shaped various objects with clay like dolls, image of god, snakes, tigers, foxes, dogs, cats, human figures, cows, birds—whatever I could find around me.

One day I made a toy snake with clay, painted it and put it under the bed. Nobody had seen me doing it. Somebody discovered the snake and summoned all the people from the office of the outer building thinking it to be a live one. They tried to kill it, some brought sticks, some climbed up the beam with spears—they were running about. I had no knowledge of this. If I had known I would have told them that it was a clay snake. I did not know that so many were involved in an useless effort. They were greatly frightened. Actually, it did look quite dangerous with its raised hood. Nobody ventured to go close. One man was ready to strike but then the snake broke to pieces. There was loud laughter. I was told that a lot of fuss was being made about that clay snake. I felt embarrassed about it and never attempted to make anything after that. Yet I had a feeling that we were wasting time in useless amusement. It did not lead to anything—it was a sheer waste of time.

Some time passed. Then my mother-in-law had an attack of typhoid in which she lost her sight. She was in no position to do any work. I had to take care of her, and do even the most basic work. Over and above this, the responsibility of running the entire household was forced on me. I was greatly worried. I was at a loss because she had not allowed me to do anything ever since I had come to this house. It was a large household, to say the least. There was a deity who had to be offered rice and vegetables every day. Guests and passers-by dropped in quite often—they were given provisions. The amount of cooking to be done was not negligible. Although my husband had no brothers, the domestic staff itself numbered around twenty five. All of them ate twice a day and this food had to be cooked. Then there was my mother-in-law who could no longer see. Looking after her was a priority job. But we had only one domestic help who worked inside the house. The time I am talking about, there was not even one—I was

the only worker. The amount of work made me nervous. There was no chance that I would be able to manage all this, I began to think in desperation. I thought about the problem a great deal. Dear God, friend of the poor, I do not even expect to accomplish all the work. But if I am able to do it that will be because of you. Your will is always done. Thus with God in my heart I plunged into the work. By the grace of God I soon found the chores to be not so difficult after all. After cooking two meals for the entire family and doing other chores I still had some time left. Women were not supposed to get an education in those days, they had to stand by demurely near the master of the house after all their housework was over, as though they had no other work except household tasks. That was how people used to think in those days. A special rule for the daughter-in-law was to work with the sari pulled down over the face and not talk to anyone. These were considered the signs of a good daughter-in-law. The cloth available then was hardly the fine stuff we get now, it was coarse, I had to wear the coarse material, draw the end of the sari down to my chest and work without a word. My eyes were covered like the eye-shades worn by bulls on a tether. I could see nothing except my own feet. That was the system for the daughters-in-law and I followed that system.

FIFTH COMPOSITION

Dear Lord greatest of the great, Almighty God
Who is beyond beginning and end
The great treasure you aspire for
Is none else but Him.
The mind is engrossed in things material
and is sunk in its deep waters

With no hope of recovery. What a blunder

to forget the ultimate One
Know for sure that the offspring of the sun is there
Why have you forgotten that
Are you not aware that all you have
Your husband, sons, people, wealth
are only images
You believe it is your own family
You are caring for since birth
But nobody will accompany you
When you enter the house of death
It is for nothing that you cherish your
People, your wealth, they will
be left here

You came here alone and that is how you will depart
The one who has sent you here will
call you back at his side
Why are you then enamoured of
an illusion which has got you into a trap.
I appeal to you my mind, leave the illusory path
The greatest of the great God is the
Ultimate truth, remember that
Knowledge will take you to the
precious treasure
If you take refuge in him you will be
rid of the fear of death
Since you intend to cross over the
sea of life
Do not make a mistake
Merciful God, friend of the poor
Is all you have in your voyage.

My day used to begin very early—and there was no respite from housework till long past midnight. I could not rest, even for a moment. But thanks to the grace of God I did everything in a spirit of duty. No work seemed too tiring. Because God wished it, I managed to gradually

finish all the household chores. I was only fourteen then. Around this time, the idea that I should learn how to read books entered my mind. But unfortunately girls were not supposed to read in those days. "What is the world coming to?" they used to say. "To think that women will be doing the work of men! Never heard of it before. In this new age even this has come to be true! These days women are becoming famous and men seem good for nothing. Such strange things never happened before. There is even a woman ruler on the throne. Who knows what other changes are in store for us! The way things are going, a decent man will very soon lose his caste. Pretty soon the womenfolk will get together and study books."

When I overheard these conversations I used to feel really scared. I have never dared to tell anyone about my desires—but now I became afraid that they might come to know what was on my mind. I dared not look at a page with written letters on it, in case they attributed it to my desire for learning. But I prayed constantly to God. I said, "Please, God, help me learn, so that I can read religious books. Dear God, friend of the poor, I invoke your name only for this." I used to say, "God, you have brought me so far from my village Potajia—a journey of three days and three nights to Ramdia. You have made me leave my friends and my relations and have brought me to this faraway place. And now, this village of Ramdia has become my home. How strange that is! When I did not know how to do any housework, even the slightest attempt would please my mother. She used to praise me before others. Look at me now. I am no longer free. I have learned to work for others. And there is so much I should do. These people have become very dear to me. . . All these thoughts raced through my mind and I would shed tears, hiding my face in the sari that was drawn over my head. Nobody knew of my sorrow. How could they know, for my face lay hidden. Only you knew because you

are my father, my God, the heart of my heart, the life of my life, the very cream of kindness. I float in your kindness all the time. You have been with me through good days and bad days. You know all that I have experienced; I cannot keep anything back from you."

I left my village at the age of twelve. Ever since then I have lived in Ramdia. But I must admit the people here are very good. They are fond of me. Whenever I was physically ill they were so concerned that I forgot all the discomfort. Even the neighbours and the servants were kind. It was as though God had asked them to be particulary nice to me. I was confident that they loved me more than they loved people from their own family. In fact, none of them was ever rude to me or showed displeasure in any way. Everyone was extremely kind. And I include my immediate family also, who are good beyond comparison. Everybody loved me sincerely. No one ever spoke a harsh word. Even now they are nice, but I do not know how long this will continue. I do not know how much longer I'll have to be here. Only God knows what will happen to me in my last days—whether people will still be as kind as they were.

Dear Master, all-pervading Father of the Universe! Your glory is without end. Who can fathom your actions! Only you know their reason. It is a mistake for mortals even to try to think about such things. I came to the village of Ramdia at the age of twelve. For the next six years I was treated like a new bride. My mind too was playful, like that of a child. That was how I spent the first eighteen years of my life. But it was a very happy time for me. I had little to worry about. My only effort was to please people through the work I did in the house. My only regret was that I was not able to read and write because I was a girl. Women of today are so lucky. Many parents educate their daughters. I think this is a good practice.

Now I am going to describe the children who were born to me I had a son, Bipinbehari, when I was eighteen. At twenty-one, I had another son, Pulinbehari. At twenty-three, I had a daughter. She was named Ramsundari. Another son was born when I was twenty-five. He was called Pearylal. The next son, Radhanath, was born when I was twenty-eight. At thirty, I had another son, Dwarakanath. When I was thirty-two, I had another son, who was called Chandranath. When I was thirty-four I had one more son, Kishorilal. Then another child, a son, lived in my womb for six months, but then he died. After this, when I was thirty-seven, I had one more son, called Pratap Chandra. Then at the age of thirty-nine I had a daughter, Shyamsundari. When I was forty-one I had my youngest —a son named Mukundalal. My first child was born when I was eighteen and the last when I was forty-one. God only knows what I had to go through during those twenty-three years. Nobody else had any idea either.

There were eight maidservants in the house, but all of them lived outside the household. There was nobody to do the household chores in the inner quarters. I was the only one. As was the custom, I had to do all the work and look after the children as well. I had to work right through the day and the night, without a moment's rest. Suffice it to say that I had no time to think about my own health. So much so that I often did not eat either of the two meals. There were days when the pressure of work did not let me even have one meal during the course of the day. I should not dwell on those things, however. I fell ashamed even to mention them. Yet I think I should speak briefly of one or two incidents. I used to get up before the children woke up in order to do all the work around the house. I even started cooking before they were up. After feeding the children I finished whatever else was left to be done. Then I had to make my offerings to the family deity and get

ready to prepare the meals for the rest of the family. I had to cook quite a lot—about twelve *seers* of rice for each meal. The master of the house had to eat his meal of rice just after he had bathed in the morning. He would not eat anything else. So I had to cook specially for him first. In the next round I cooked for the entire family. So it used to be about four in the afternoon before the cooking was done.

One afternoon I was just about to sit down to eat, having cooked and served the family, when a guest arrived. He was of a low caste and he refused to cook for himself. He said, "I would like to have some rice if I may." He refused to eat anything else. There was no time to cook again. So there was no other way. I had to offer him the food I had served for myself. I thought I'd cook something in the evening and went back to do the household chores. I put the children to bed and went into the kitchen. I was feeling extremely hungry. There was nobody else at home and I could easily have helped myself to some of the food that was there. There was nobody to stop me. Besides, the other members of the family would only have been happy to see me eating. But the problem was I never served myself anything except rice, which automatically ruled out many other foodstuffs. If others came to know that I had not eaten, they'd have made a lot of fuss—that was what I told myself. Besides, the children always bother the mother if they find her eating. What was the point of creating all that fuss? I went into the kitchen and began to cook. I finished the cooking. It grew late but my husband was still in his office in the outer house. There was no sign of him, so I served all the others and waited up for my husband. It was so late that very soon the children would be up, I kept thinking. That meant going without food again. Then my worst fears came true. As soon as my husband came in, one of the children woke up and started whining. I served my

husband and picked up the child hoping to put him to sleep by the time my husband had finished. I could manage to eat with the sleeping child on my lap. But presently another one was up and joined ihe chorus. "Never mind," I said, "I'll hold both of them and manage to eat." So I picked up the other child from his bed. Suddenly, when I began to eat, a storm started blowing. The lamp went out. This scared the children and they began to cry again. I was so hungry that I would have eaten in the dark if I did did not have to hold the children. There were maidservants but they were outside. How could I send the children outdoors in the darkness? My husband was sure to ask why the children were crying. It was better that I did not eat. So I had to leave my plate there and go into the adjoining room. Later on the storm blew over. The children were asleep. But I felt too tired to eat. I had been forced to fast the whole day. Next day I went through the routine and hurried to the kitchen. Nobody knew that I had not eaten the previous day. After everybody ate, I thought I'd finally have the time to have something myself. But that was not to be. I had to serve the servant who was holding the baby. Then the baby needed milk too. I attended to both of them and sat down with a plate of rice, the baby in my lap. No sooner had I done so than the baby decided to have a motion and urinated in such a way that all the rice was washed away.

This was an act of God and it made me laugh. I did not tell anyone that I had been without food for the last two days. It was an embarrassing subject and I did not want others to discuss it. So I preferred to keep quiet about it. Thus on many occasions I was forced to go without food. By the grace of God I had excellent health. It would have been difficult to bring the children up if I had been sickly. Dear God! Who can fathom your glory? I feel overwhelmed to think of your kindness to your daughter. I am ignorant of your greatness. I call on you

only because my mother asked me to do so. Blessed is my life, my birth. I am grateful for everything.

Merciful God! I am only an unfortunate girl. I hardly know you. I don't know what I would have done without you. If I had had a sickly body I couldn't possibly have raised my children. I would have been most miserable with a sick body. I thank you a hundred times. Friend of the poor! It is only through your good grace that I have come to know what it takes to bring up a child, what agony the mother has to go through. I never knew that a mother has to suffer so much for the sake of her children. People never realize these things unless they go through similar pressures. Now I know perfectly well the tortures a mother has to undergo because of her children. Every human being should know this. Most people do not have any knowledge about the matter.

I regret to say that I have not taken good care of my own mother, who was so affectionate. A mother is a very precious thing—it is my misfortune that I did not understand it. She suffered so much for any sake. But I was not of any use to her. She did not derive any benefit from me. She used to cry for me and wanted to have me over. But I am a virtual prisoner here. They never sent me to her because the household work here would suffer. I was allowed to go back to attend some family festival but had to return in a couple of days like a slave. About fifteen people accompanied me on the boat along with two senior men and two maidservants. I was allowed to visit my people only under certain conditions. I was allowed to go only on special occasions, not otherwise. When my mother lay on her deathbed she wanted very badly to see me. I have caused her sorrow, hateful sinner that I am. I tried my utmost, but could not go. It is my misfortune. It is a matter of no ordinary regret. Alas, my God, why did you let me be born as a human being? It is indeed a very rare fortune to be born a human being. Birds and

beasts are inferior beings. And to think of the sin I have committed even after being fortunate enough to be born a human. Why was I ever born a woman? Shame on my life! A mother is the most affectionate person in the world, the representative of God on earth—and I could not even be of any use to her. My grief knew no bounds. If I were a son I would have flown directly to my mother's bedside. But I am helpless. I am a caged bird.

SIXTH COMPOSITION

Born in the land of Bharat, living, in a daze of illusion
I have lost my days for ever
What is the way out for me, please have mercy on me
God, the container of the universe.
You are all pervading, the deluge ends in you
Who can claim to have the real knowledge.
It is hardly for me to describe the virtues
Of one who is endless and unfathomable.
The scriptures, the Vedas, the Koran have all been trying to fathom you

But how can they assess your ways
Nobody is in possession of that knowledge
Unless you reveal yourself, who in the three worlds
Is capable of understanding you!
Who am I to claim such privilege
A weak insignificant
Woman that I am
You pervade every place as the quality of excellence
That is my only hope
I have surrendered myself, now it is up to you to save me or not.

*I was so immersed in the sea of housework that I was not conscious of what I was going through day and night.

After some time the desire to learn how to read properly grew very strong in me. I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read. How could I? What a peculiar situation I had placed myself in. What was I to do? This was one of the bad aspects of the old system. The other aspects were not so bad. People used to deprive women of learning. How unfortunate those women were, they said. They were no better than animals. But it is no use blaming others. Our fate is our own. In fact, older women used to show a great deal of displeasure if they saw a piece of paper in the hands of a woman. So that ruled out my chances of getting any education. But somehow I could not accept this. I was very keen to learn the alphabet. When I was a child I used to sit in the schoolroom and listen to the chanting of the students. Could I remember any of that? By and by I recalled the thirty letters with all their vowel combinations. I could recognize the letters, but was still not able to write them. What was I to do? Actually one cannot learn without a teacher. Besides, I was a woman, and a married one at that, and was not supposed to talk to anyone. If anyone spoke a harsh word to me I would die of shame. That was the fear that kept me from talking to anyone. My only hope was God and my constant prayer was, "Dear God, I can learn to read and write only if you teach me. Who else is there to be my teacher?" Days passed in this manner.

One day I dreamt that I was reading the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. When I woke up I felt enthralled. I closed my eyes to go over the scene. It seemed that I was already in possession of something precious. My body and my mind swelled with satisfaction. It was so strange! I had never seen the book yet I had been reading it in my dream. For an illiterate person like me, it would have been absolutely impossible to read such a difficult book. Anyhow, I was pleased that I was able to perform this impossible feat, at

least in a dream. My life was blessed! God had at last listened to my constant appeals and had given me the ability to read in my dream. Thank you, dear God. You have made me so happy: He had given me what I had wanted so much, and I was happy.

Our home contained many books. Perhaps the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* is one of them, I thought to myself. But what did it matter to me, after all? An illiterate woman like me wouldn't even recognize the book. So I prayed to God again, saying: You are the friend of the poor; allow me to recognize the book. You must let me have that book. You are the only one whom I can approach. That was how I prayed to God silently.

How strange are the ways of God and the effects of his kindness! He heard my prayers and set out to grant me my wish. My eldest son was then eight. I was working in the kitchen one day when my husband came in and said to him, "Bipin, I am leaving my *Chaitanya Bhagavata* here. Please bring it over when I ask you to." Saying that he put the book down and went back to the outer house.

I listened from the kitchen. No words can express the delight I felt when I heard his words. I was filled with happiness and rushed to the spot to find the book there. Pleased with myself, I said to God, "You have granted my wish," and I picked the book up. In those days books were made differently. There were illustrated wooden frames to hold the sheets. Since I did not know how to read, I tried to remember the illustrations.

When the book was brought into the room I detached one sheet and hid it. But I was afraid lest it be found. That would be a disgrace. I might even be rebuked. It was not easy to face criticism or rebuke. I was very sensitive about those things. Those days were not like present ones. We were completely under the control of men. And I was particularly nervous. I was at a loss with that sheet. Where should I keep it so that nobody would

find it? But if they did, what would they say? Finally I decided to put it in some place where I would be present most of the time and nobody else was likely to go. The *khori** in the kitchen was the only hiding place I could think of. Housework kept me busy the whole day. There was no time even to look at it. In the evening the cooking continued until it was very late. By the time I was free, the children had awakened. Some demanded to be taken to the toilet, some were hungry, some wanted to be picked up, some started crying, so I had to attend to their demands. Then I felt sleepy myself—so where was the time for my education? I did not see any way out. No one could learn without the help of a teacher. There were some letters that I could recognize but I wasn't able to write them. How can one be literate without being able to write? So how was I to read that sheet? I thought and thought about it but could not find a way out. Besides, the danger of being seen was very much there.

Gradually I began to lose hope, but I prayed to God constanly: Please, God, teach me how to read. If you don't, who else will? That was my constant prayer. Sometimes I used to think that I would never succeed. Even if I tried hard and somebody was willing to teach me, where was the time? It was useless. I'd never learn. The very next moment I thought: Of course I will. God has given me hope. He can never disappoint me. Encouraged, I kept that sheet to myself. But I had no time to look at it. I kept the sheet in my left hand while I did the cooking and glanced at it through the sari, which was drawn over my face. But a mere glance was not enough, because I could not identify the letters.

I decided to steal one of the palm leaves on which my eldest son used to practise his handwriting. One look at

*The khori is an elevated bamboo platform, used as a storage space in East Bengal (now Bangladeshi) village kitchens.

the leaf, another at the sheet, a comparison with the letters I already knew, and, finally, a verification with the speech of others—that was the process I adopted for some time. Furtively I would take out the sheet and put it back promptly before anybody could see it.

Wasn't it a matter to be regretted, that I had to go through all this humiliation just because I was a woman? Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offence. It is such a pleasure to see the women today enjoying so much freedom. These days parents of a single girl child take so much care to educate her. But we had to struggle so much just for that. The little that I have learned is only because God did me the favour.

Actually the man who was my master happened to be a likeable person. But it is difficult to ignore or reject accepted customs and practices. That was why I had to undergo all that misery. Anyway, it is no use crying over spilt milk. In those days people considered the education of women to be wrong. Even now we come across some who are enemies of education. The very word excites their displeasure. Actually they were not really to blame; it was a just the spirit of the age. If you compare that period with the present you find many changes—beyond count. If the people of the earlier generation were here to witness all these changes, they would have died of disgust and shame. But whatever God directs seems to be for the good. The heavy dress of the women in those days, the heavy jewellery, the conch-shell bangles, and large vermilion dots used to look very pretty. Of course not all clothes were like that. Some were such as to cause disgust.

But I have no reason to complain. God has looked after me well and I spent my time with a happy heart. Suffice it to say that whatever He does is for the best. As a child I used to sit with the other children in the primary school. This proved to be useful when I compared the letters of the palm leaf and the sheet of the book with the

memory of the alphabet I had. All through the day I went on doing this in my mind. After a great deal of time and with great effort I somehow managed to stumble through the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. Books were not printed in those days. The handwriting was difficult to decipher. Oh, the trouble I had to take to read! In spite of all that, I did not learn to write. One needs a lot of things if one is to write: paper, pen, ink, ink pot, and so on. You have to set everything before you. And I was a woman, the daughter-in-law of the family. I was not supposed to read or write. It was generally accepted as a grave offence. And if they saw me with all the writing paraphernalia, what would they say? I was always afraid of criticism. So I gave up the idea of writing and concentrated on reading. I never thought I would be able to read. It seemed an impossible task in my situation. The little that I have learned was possible because God guided me. I was deeply engrossed in whatever I could read and the idea of writing did not cross my mind.

SEVENTH COMPOSITION

Where are you, O Saviour of the poor, you who
 are full of kindness
Observe the despair of this victim, be kind to me
You are our father, the ocean of kindness
 and the bestower of love
Do rescue me from this depth of despair
My heart is now activated by the poison
 of material things
To the extent that you are no longer in my
 thoughts—what will happen to me?
Orphan that I am with nobody to turn to
Who would understand my agony except you.
My offences are countless
I do not know how to cross over to the life beyond

Since your mercy is endless
I am emboldened to hope to reach the other shore
But then when I think that
I don't even know how to call you
It makes me deeply worried
Dear master, I am so overwhelmed by these thoughts
The ocean seems endless, I am sad
You are my saviour, help me out of this danger
Since you are there who else should I turn to
Who else has the power to save me
You are the ocean of kindness and are known
by that name
Why should I then despair so much?
I have no strength, no wisdom, I am unable to speak
Do appear before me as a boat in the waves
This delay is becoming unbearable
Please think of Rassundari's plight
and show your mercy.

My Father—the king of all kings. Why should I feel so miserable since I am the daughter of such a king? Is it possible for a king's daughter to be miserable? But Father—I cannot see you. This makes me unhappy—like an orphan who is denied the company of his parents.

This was how I used to feel, trying to read and write all the while. I was then twenty-five years of age: this was how these twenty-five years of my life were spent. Meanwhile, the earlier phase of childhood seemed to be undergoing a change. My body was clothed in the garb of youth and my mind, too, had lost the innocence of childhood and become engrossed in matters of money and property. How wonderful, how strange! No trace of my childhood was left.

So it went on for some time. Meanwhile my mother-in-law died. Her death left the house unattended—I was left alone. The management of the household was now my

responsibility. I was in great difficulty. I was then a mother of four and, on top of that, mistress of the household. The earlier state had changed—everything was new. I used to be the new bride—that too was gone. I was called Mother by some, others called me Ma Thakurani. Ma, Karta Thakurani and so on. All the traces of my childhood were gone. My feelings too changed into those of an older person. My physical and mental states were exactly the opposite of what they used to be. It seemed to me that I was not me but somebody else. All my weakness was gone, I was strong and brave. My assets grew—children, servants, subjects. As I watched my prosperity I felt I am a real householder now—what a strange thing to happen. Most of the people address me as Karta Thakurani. Let us see what else is in store.

I had three sisters-in-law. They were widowed and came to stay with us. They were very affectionate and took good care of me. I, too, served them with as much respect as I did the deities. Technically, they were younger than me but I was very apprehensive and submissive to them. They too loved me dearly. The love they had for their brother's wife was something of a rarity. Even after I had given birth to four or five children I never spoke up to them. Although I had to act as the mistress of the house I never did anything without consulting them. They were very considerate in every way.

I had left my parents' home at the age of twelve to come into my in-laws' family. By the time I was twenty-five I had changed considerably, but some of my childish ideas remained. They were not expressed. People used to pull my leg when I was nine, saying my mother was not married. I was so innocent that I believed them. Some traits of that stupidity lingered at the age of twenty-five but they remained hidden.

There was a horse called Joyhari in that house. One day they put my eldest son on the horse and brought him

in to show him to me. Everybody said this horse belongs to the master. I was asked to have a look at my son—look how he rides—they said. I was inside the room but overheard that the horse belonged to my husband. I felt too embarrassed to go out. Suppose the horse saw me—that would be a matter of great shame—so I argued, and hid inside the room. Everybody entreated me to come out. What is there to be afraid of, they said. But I was nervous and just looked from inside the room.

We used to have paddy heaped in our courtyard. Joyhari was in the habit of straying into the courtyard and chomping the paddy, but I felt so bashful of appearing before the horse that I fled inside the room the moment I caught sight of him. Days went by. It so happened that once I was serving food to my children in the kitchen and had gone to another room on an errand when the horse came into the courtyard and started eating paddy. I was in a fix. The children were eating, some of them were asking for me, some started crying. Meanwhile, the horse did not show any sign of budging—but went on chewing the paddy. I went forward one step, then retreated—I was in a dilemma. It was my husband's horse—what could I do? I stayed where I was lest it should look at me. My eldest son came up at that point and told me, "Mother, the horse won't do anthing—it is Jayhari, our horse. Don't be afraid." I was amused at my own folly. What a fool I had been! I was not really afraid of the horse; the reason I never came before it was my bashfulness. But it was a horse after all, not a human being. No harm is done if it happens to look at me. Others would certainly make fun of me if they came to know about this! Actually, nobody knew that I felt bashful before the horse, they thought I was afraid. So I did not reveal it to anyone. From that day I did not hide from the horse. If others knew, how they would have ridiculed me. Actually I was timid by nature. These days children do not frighten so easily; in

fact, older people are afraid of children. Anyhow, I was ashamed of myself. Others could very easily laugh at me; I myself cannot hold back laughter when I think of my own actions.

I used to draw my sari *pallu* over my face pulling it down to the breast. But then I decided I was no longer a new bride and it was hardly necessary to keep this up. Work would suffer. So I started talking to some of the maidservants. I began to be more communicative with the sisters-in-law. I did all the household work alone and went through the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* without anyone's knowledge. Nobody except the maidservants knew that I was able to read books. Some of the people from my village who used to stay with me also knew of this. It went on in this way for some time.

Gradually, I had more children and my position as the mistress of the house was consolidated. Many people pray to God for prosperity, being of the view that it leads to happiness in the family. But I can vow that I never never aspired for wealth. Yet God was kind to me—He gave me part of what is needed for carrying on family life. He gave me no cause for regret. Whatever people can have, like sons and daughters, servants and maids, loyal subjects, relations, honour, amusement—by the grace of God I had not a little of all these.

It is said that a mother of many children suffers a lot. That statement is not wrong. This is really true. Actually all children are not made in the same mould. Some may turn out to be uneducated or go astray. Some are ugly to look at, some are stupid, some waste all the inherited wealth in useless pursuits. These actions trigger criticism which naturally makes parents unhappy to the extent that they become sick of life. Parents have genuine love for their offspring. So any attempt to treat them badly or to spread scandals about them, creates terrible agony in their minds. Nobody can stop such feelings.

In fact, no agony is equal to the one which parents suffer on account of their children. A son gone astray is a reason for torture, whether he is alive or dead. In fact, a mother undergoes greater suffering than the father. But I am happy to say that God has been kind to have spared me this pain. All my children—the sons and the daughters—were of the same kind. They were all good-looking, of good moral character, educated, generous, kind-hearted and religious. They never did any offensive thing. I never had to suffer on account of their character. But one must not be proud—God might take away that pride—He can do anything. Nobody knows what fate has in store.

Too much pride brought about the
ruin of Lanka
The Kauravas were destoyed for
the same reason
King Bali had to pay for his
over-generosity
Excess in any form is bad.

EIGHTH COMPOSITION

You are the light of my life, you are the
beginning and the end
You are all-knowing
If we harbour deceit you make us pay for it
You are the only one who gives fruits
for our labour
There is nobody else who can appreciate
the heart's agony
There is no need to say more, you know
everything, please do not forsake me.

Dear Saviour of the fallen! O kind friend of the poor! You reside in my heart always. Nothing that goes through my mind is unknown to you. You are aware of all that.

You are the world and life,
you are the essence of this world
I beseech you, I beseech you
I beseech you, my lord.

If I have tried to hide my misdeeds, please expose them. Remind me of things I have forgotten. I never try to deceive or cheat in words or in deeds. But in case I do so by mistake, do correct me. Let not my mind think of ever going against your laws. Oh Father the great God! You are aware of the feelings which flit across my mind, I need not elaborate.

I don't know how to write, I am as good
as a donkey
Whatever I have written is only due
to your kindness.

Whatever I speak or think
Are all directed towards reaching you.

As I was blessed with a dozen children, they might have caused me great worry, had they been wicked and spoken ill of. But due to the will of God I did not have to go through this. On the other hand, I felt cheerful hearing them being praised. However, I am going to express the state of my mind and body at various stages of my life. This world has been called an ocean. That is right but if we compare the two, perhaps the waves of the ocean would pale before the waves of the world, although they may be equal. However that may be, God had kept me in great peace and happiness within the waves of the sea. Misfortune did strike from time to time but my cheerful spirit never deserted me. The misfortune was not an ordinary one—it was the loss of a son. I felt I was being tossed up and down in the ocean of grief. I would float up again, and I was always happy. The state of my mind and body continued to be the same for twenty-eight years,

and when I was forty years old, my eldest son Bipin was married and a daughter-in-law joined the family. I cannot describe the thrill and joy—I was beyond myself with rapture. I was a mother-in-law now. How happy that made me! I was considered one of the older generation. I was in my parents' home and the next twenty-eight years of my life were spent in captivity. That is how I spent these forty years. The state of my body and my feelings were of one kind. But gradually I began to feel older. Nothing remained of the state of my body and mind which I used to have earlier. It was as if I do not have the same body and the same mind. I wondered at the strange ways of God. I did not get old all of a sudden but I did change a great deal both physically and mentally. I used to wonder at the ways of my mind and body. How could my mind go through such varieties of emotions? I used to be afraid all the time, who had given me that fear and who took it away? I reflected about my past emotions; for instance, there used to be a time I could not step out of the room alone at night, unless accompanied by two people. Yet I was not free from fear. I have remained the same person with the same mind. Then how had I got so much courage and strength? The secret of this is beyond me. How strange this is! Who has bestowed on me the gift of fearlessness? These days I am not even frightened by the spirit of evil. Who was behind this? I never tell anyone of my innermost desires, so nobody knows of these. Yet my desires are fulfilled. How is this accomplished? Meanwhile, wonderful things are happening—my home, family, sons, daughters, servants, maids, property and wealth have accumulated. From where did all these assets come? Everybody calls me the mistress of the house—*karta thakurani*. Who has employed me in this position of stewardship? At whose request have I been employed in this job? Isn't all this wonderful and strange? I do not know what to make of these strange happenings. I have no

words to express my gratitude to the initiator of all this work. I thank the Maker hundreds of times. Alas! Where are you, the great father, the ocean of kindness? Please appear before the orphan daughter, even a glimpse would oblige her greatly.

Why have I confined myself to matters of the world, who has enticed me by a spell of enchantment? Perhaps my mind has become deluded by property and wealth on its own. But again I think this is not fair. Unless it is given, how can the mind acquire anything? The one who has been kind enough to give everything has also kept us enticed in worldly matters. This conflict troubled me quite often.

I was attracted to the scriptures and devotional songs. But in those days women did not enjoy any freedom at all, they could not do anything on their own, they were totally under others. It was like the life of a bird in a cage. Nevertheless I would like to put down my feelings even in those circumstances.

How strange are the ways of the mind
Like a dwarf it reaches at the moon.

I used to feel as though I was six-handed. Two of my hands wanted to do all the household work to the satisfaction of everyone—from the young to the old. Another pair of hands wished to keep my children close to me. The other pair wanted to catch the moon. How strange! It left me absolutely speechless. Look at the moon—millions of miles away! Has anyone ever been able to hold the moon in his hands? No, never. It was a futile wish. When children want to hold the moon and shout to get it, then the elders sing a song to pacify them! "Come down oh moon kiss my darling on the forehead." I had to pacify myself in the same way. I was pining for *kirtan* songs and stories of the *Purana* but there was no way. We used to have recitations from the *Purana* and other

devotional songs in the outer courtyard, these were not audible from the house. The outer courtyard was at a distance and I never went out of the house. How was I then to listen? But my mind was not convinced, it was determined to listen to the *Purana*.

I was able to read books, but was not able to find the time to do so. Moreover, I was afraid of what others would say if they happened to see me reading a book. I could not convince myself by arguments but neither was there any way out. Then I had an idea. If my three sisters-in law ever found me reading the scriptures, that would be the end. I decided to read during the time they were engaged in their puja or while they were eating. I took some of my neighbours who were always with me to a lonely spot to read the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. One of us used to keep watch while we continued with the reading. I used to read out in short stretches but I felt very nervous lest somebody should come and hear me. Actually fear was my greatest enemy. I was afraid of everything. But fortunately my companions were good people. With their help I did some singing too. This went on for some time. People of the old school still believed that it was wicked for women to be educated. Why would the women earn money? they asked. These days women are crazy after education. But we feel women should stay at home, do the household work, cook and be bashful mostly. We did not have such fads in our time. People say education makes a person better. Well, we are not educated, are we not good enough as human beings? This was their opinion. For them education had only one virtue, to earn money. All such talks used to frighten me very much. Yet, I did not give up my secret reading sessions. In this way time went on.

Much later, when I began to talk freely with my three sisters-in-law they were greatly delighted. We found that we had many ideas in common. They came to know of my reading ability. This made them very happy. They said to

me: How we wished we knew that you could read! Two of them began to take lessons from me though they could not continue for very long. But I was specially treated because I was the only one who could read. Since there was no need for secrecy after that, I read out from the scriptures right in front of them. Oh, how happy I was! God had granted my long-cherished wish. Sometimes I used to sing with the neighbours of my own age. Housework seemed very light to me. I used to feel contented the whole day. Material matters or misfortunes did not affect me. By the grace of God I was happy and content.

It is obvious that many people have to bear the burden of grief in family matters. I was not unhappy in any way, yet I could avoid considerable pain inwardly and outwardly. Dear God, do not let anyone go through the agony, the greatest agony of all—the loss of a child. I had ten sons and two daughters—twelve in all—I would especially like to mention the ones who died. My second son Pulin Behari died during his rice-eating ceremony. Another of my sons, Pyarilal, had grown to be twenty-one. He used to study in Berhampur College, he breathed his last in that district. Another son, Radhanath, died at the age of thirteen. One died at the age of three, he was called Chandranath. My youngest son, Mukundalal, died when he was only four. My eldest daughter gave birth to a baby boy when she was seventeen. But she died on the thirteenth day, when the mother and child were still in the "birth-room". The baby too did not live. I lost one son after six months of pregnancy. My eldest son, Bepinbehari, had two sons—both died, one at the age of three and the other at the age of four.

If I think of all these losses, I am plunged in the sea of grief—I have lost two grandchildren, six sons and one daughter. I am now left with four sons and just one daughter. God only knows what the future has in store for me. A householder must bear his share of grief and

happiness—that has been destined by God. Some dwell only with the grief and are in constant agony. On the other hand, there are people who refuse to take notice of any misfortune, however great.

Well, there is a saying that the loss of a son is like being hit by a weapon. Considering everything, I feel the two cannot be considered the same. A man may die from a weapon wound if it is bad enough. But if the wound is mild, the man may suffer from the raw wounds. But once the wounds heal, the body recovers. But the wound of grief stays all through life. However much one may try to keep cool or distract the mind—the flame of grief keeps burning inside. People almost turn mad with grief, they lose their human qualities and go through unspeakable agony. People wish to die, but death does not come. What happens is worse than death.

NINTH COMPOSITION

Oh my master whose mercy is like the ocean,
friend of the destitute, saviour of all.
I am calling you with all my might
but have you gone deaf, can't you hear me?
Do glance at your own creation,
I am like a parched *chataka* bird
You know everything yet pretend not
to know, how long can I go on?
You have saved the wicked and the cruel
as your kindness has no end
But you are being unkind to me, a woman,
having no strength and freedom.
There are hundreds of sinners in the world
they will all be saved.
How then can you save the rest of the people
leaving me out—that is what I would like to see
You are the lord of the universe, saviour of

the fallen, your very name is *patitapavan*.
You cannot escape Rassundari clinging to you
till she gets shelter at your feet and gets
a word of encouragement from you.

The ways of God are beyond comprehension. Only He knows what He intends to do and when. Ever since I learnt to feed myself (I recall the incident clearly) I have never let anyone else feed me. Today on the twenty seventh day of *Bhadra*, the year 1280, I have been reduced to a state of childhood. Cooking was over, I was just about ready to sit down to eat when suddenly I hurt the middle finger of my right hand and it started bleeding. Naturally, I could not use my hand and had to be fed by somebody else. So we can't even eat as we want to—no work can be accomplished without the will of God. Yet, we are so full of vanity. Only God is true, the rest are illusions. Yet people keep saying: My body, my house, my room. This ego is a great mistake, but men are deluded by illusions.

Let that be, let me turn to what I intended to tell. The loss of my son kept gnawing at my heart but it could not destroy me completely. My mother had taught me the great *mantra*—the great name of Dayamaya—merciful God—even before I was old enough to understand everything. That remedy has pierced my bones. This remedy, a strong *Vishalyakarani*, puts soothing balm on my tortured mind, pervaded as it is by the poison ot material matters. It fills my mind with such happiness that no poison is able to overpower me again. Evil sentiments are pushed back and driven out; such are the virtues of *Vishalyakarani* that its presence is enough to overpower enemies. So wonderful, so precious, is this remedy—even a whiff of which subdues the sinister desires, and body and mind are filled with a flow of nectar. People suffer because they are not aware of this remedy. This is a great pity. We have become blind in spite of eyes to see. People seem to think that *Vishalyakarani* is difficult to obtain as it grows

on the inaccessibe mountain of Gandhamadana. Isn't that strange! How misguided we are indeed. The seed of that herb is sown within us, but we know nothing of it. This is a pity. Instead of making use of it we plunge into the depths of grief. Isn't that a matter of great misfortune? Our heart is full of precious gems yet we are so unfortunate, yet we do not bother to open it and bemoan instead our wretched lot. This is a matter of great pity. It breaks my heart to think of it. If I did not have this great gift from my mother, I do not know what I would have done. However, my mind is always full of happiness and love, due to the mercy of God for which I am much obliged to Him. Oh kind lord, friend of the poor, we do not realise the extent of Your love which is so evident. Father, You have created such a wonderful mechanism inside our body. We have entered it and are observing it all the time. Yet we are not completely aware of what is happening inside our bodies. Oh kind lord—we have not the slightest idea of Your ways which makes us all the more anxious to know You. Dear master, the one who wishes to determine Your real nature must surely be stupid. But we believe that You are kind to Your followers. Devotees are My parents, they are My heart, they provide Me with a place of rest—You have said so Yourself. You give yourself up to a sincere devotee. However, You are the source of all my actions. Nothing escapes Your notice, You are aware of the fleeting emotions of my mind. There was a time when I was eager to read books. You planned things in such a way that I could read all the books in our house. I am filled with wonder whenever I ponder on this. It is indeed strange that an illiterate person like me was able to read books. It is only by the glory of the Father who is known to fulfil all ones' wishes that my education could take place under such circumstances. He has made my wishes come true, for better or for worse. My mind, so keen to read, was

satisfied by reading all the books we had in the house—*Chaitanya Bhagavata*, the eighteen volumes of the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, *Jaimini Bharat*, *Valmiki-Purana*. The *Valmiki-Purana* had only the first part, not all seven.

God has devised our natural inclinations in such a manner that human beings aspire for the whole once they have got a part of something. The first canto of *Valmiki Purana* whetted my appetite for the entire book. But we did not have the whole book at home. I tried to procure the other cantos but they were not available in the village. I was getting desperate, wondering what to do. In those days my fifth son Dwarkananth was attending college in Calcutta. The problem would have been solved if I could have written to him. But I did not know how to write. By then almost everybody had come to know of my ability to read though they were not aware of the way I used to hanker after books. Later, they were pleased to hear of this. I consider that to be my great good fortune. Initially, I used to be nervous but later came to realise that my reading did not displease anybody. Rather, they encouraged me. I could have got the book (the *Purana*) if I had asked for it. But this was something against my nature, I fond it extremely difficult to demand anything. Now of course the situation has changed, I can talk to my children more freely.

Anyway, I was greatly anxious to get hold of the complete *Valmiki Purana*. Meanwhile, my son came home. I told him, "Dwari, you have a lot of books in your home but not the seven volumes of the *Valmiki Purana*. I would like to have them." Dwari said to me, "Mother, the first thing I'll do after going back to Calcutta is to send you that book." Then he went back to Calcutta. My anxiety to have the book was so great that it seemed I was physically ill, I went through such agony.

After a few days the book arrived. Overwhelmed with joy I looked over it. But the print was too small for

me to read. I cannot describe the unhappiness I felt. Holding the book I complained to God and wept. I said to him, "Oh Saviour of the poor, you have given me the book at last but it is hardly of any use to me. It was brought with such care but I couldn't read it." I shed copious tears.

After a while I felt ashamed of myself. Why am I crying—I asked myself. For shame, what was I going to tell people if they wanted to know the reason for my tears? So I wiped my eyes and told myself, why should I weep? Once I was an illiterate. But who has taught me to read? If God so wills, I will also be able to read the book since He has been so kind and generous to me.

I controlled my tears and began to read the book. By the grace of God I could read the printed letters fairly well. Earlier I had thought that I wouldn't be able to read them at all. But I soon found out that printed words were better than handwritten ones as they were written in those days. For a person of my scant knowledge, the printed words were better. Thus I began to comprehend all the letters though I had never attempted to write.

I used to complain to God saying, "Dear God, you have kept me in a fairly satisfactory situation. You have given me a bit of all that is needed to carry on a family life. My only regret is that I do not know how to write. Please teach me." I used to address myself to God and weep day and night. Some time passed in this manner. I lost all hope of ever learning how to write.

But such is the will of God that my seventh son Kishorilal asked me all of a sudden, "Mother, why don't we get replies to our letters?" I replied, "I can read so I am able to read your letters. But I can't reply because I cannot write." He was not happy to hear this. He said, "I do not want such excuses, how can one live away from home without hearing from one's mother? You must reply to our letters. He gave me paper, pen, ink in a pot, and

left for Calcutta for his studies. That put me in a fix. I was not capable of writing—how was I to answer his letters? The little I could read I was not able to put down on paper. After a lot of effort I would manage to write a letter or two but my housework did not give me any time. But my son had made me promise that I would write to him. What was I to do? I was in a great dilemma.

I was in this state of mind. Meanwhile my husband came down with typhoid. This affected his eyes. He had to go to Gowari in Krishnanagar for the treatment of his eyes. I accompanied him. We stayed at Kanthalpota where my fifth son Dwarakanath used to work. We had to stay there for six months. The burden of housework was much less here. So I used this opportunity to practise writing.

The process of my education was not easy at all. It was really a painstaking one. It makes me wonder when I think of those days. It seems as if God was my teacher, otherwise learning to read and write was impossible in the situation I was in. I consider it my great good fortune that I am able to write some letters. When I was ignorant of this, I had to be totally dependent on others. I am happy with whatever little God has given me. He has been so kind to me. His kindness has extended beyond such mercies. He is looking after me day and night, in prosperity and in adversity. To think that I hardly ever think of this true friend makes me ashamed of my life, my desire. Why was I born in a human shape, sinner that I am? My birth as a human being has been in vain.

TENTH COMPOSITION

Oh my forgetful mind, how deluded you are!
Like a pot of honey fermented by poison—like
prosperity
What would happen if it breaks
There is hardly time, the fair is breaking up,

collect your wares now.
You did come to the market place of the world for trading
But you are surrounded by robbers, one does
not know what might happen.
You have to submit accounts for the goods
brought from the creditor
Keep careful vigil, nobody should lay hands on those
The day draws to an end—the time wa
spent in bargaining
Rassundari thinks: Let us leave for our real home
taking whatever is left.

How wonderful are the ways of God! I feel impatient and benumbed at the same time when I think of my physical and mental states which went through many changes. It is not easy to describe what the state of my mind and body was or what it is now becoming. In fact that would be a difficult exercise, especially with my limited ability. I do not dare to hope that I will give a complete account. However, I'll tell whatever I can.

I have no idea of what I was or what I felt like till I was five or six years of age. I must have been ignorant of most things, though I do not remember.

A couple of years later the seeds of wisdom did germinate though this did not yield any result. I was stiff and self-conscious with a weak and tender body and needed others to help me in tending the body. I was not capable of doing anything on my own. Things went on in this way for quite a while.

I was married at the age of twelve. Since then I have completely lost my freedom and been also deprived of the great fund of affection my family had for me. At one stroke my childish nature changed, I became a new bride. All my ornaments were new, so were my dresses. I learnt how to act and behave like a new bride. So from the age of twelve, for the next six years I was a new bride and

nothing else.

Meanwhile God bestowed by body with the necessary equipment. Wonder of wonders! So many actions emanate from my body yet I have no idea of how they happened—was it magic or a dream? As I observed my own body I was convinced of the existence of God, there was no need to look for him elsewhere, I could see him very clearly with my own eyes. Our kind Father, the supreme Lord, the Ocean of Kindness has not forsaken us after having endowed us with everything. When my body was being rowed like a boat on the waves of the world, his reassuring presence was with us. Do not be afraid, he kept telling me. In whatever work I did I was certain that God was with me. I had my first son when I was eighteen, then I had others, twelve altogether.

From eighteen to the age of fifty the state of my mind and body remained unchanged. I was intoxicated with household chores and taking care of the children.

As time went by I came to be considered one of the older generation though my attitude towards the family remained unchanged. For several more years I was totally engrossed in household chores but gradually a feeling of indifference grew. My health began to fail. I am talking of the time when I was about fifty-eight! Three of my sons had been married, three daughters-in-law had entered the family. My youngest daughter gave birth to a son, I was very happy with my husband, sons, daughters-in-law, daughters, members of the house, and the neighbours. But nobody can fathom what you can do, dear God, you can do anything.

You sting as snake and thrash the
poison out like a snake doctor
You give orders as a magistrate and
throw your weight about like his peon.

I was born in the year 1216 in the month of Chaitra and I was fifty-nine in 1275 (B.S.) when this book was first published. Now in 1304 I am eighty-eight years old. My physical and mental condition, the clothes I wear, are all changed and have become the opposite of what they used to be. They say that your condition never remains the same. I found this to be quite true.

Nobody can go beyond what is
ordained in fate
Neither Brahma, nor Vishnu or Maheshvara.

God's will must be done. Anyway, after crossing a long road my boat capsized near the bank.

"Shaving of the head is worse than death."
God has done this to me. On the 29th of Magh in 1275, the 14th day of the full moon at two thirty in the afternoon, my husband died. The gold crown tumbled from my head after all these years. But I do not mind, I am content to be in whatever condition God wishes to keep me. On the first day of Agrahayan of the same year our priest Gunanidhi Chakravarty died.

My situation had gone on the same way all these years. Now at the fag end of my life I encountered widowhood. That is something which is unfortunate, I feel embarrassed to talk about it.

If the mother of a hundred sons
loses her husband
Still she is considered
the unlucky one.

What people want to point out is the fact that you are a widow now, nothing else. I am amazed at the changes going on in my mind and body—they are the work of God. I have no idea of the workings. So I thank the Super-workman hundreds of times.

ELEVENTH COMPOSITION

O eternal and complete Brahma, glory be to you
I am a humble follower and I appeal to you.
I came to Bharatvarsha with a cheerful heart
Why then my master should gloom cast a shadow?
Like a snake without its head jewel I am
deeply distressed
From time to time my heart receives a shock
You are all-knowing and generous to devotees
I know why they call you the friend of the poor
I am guilty of hundreds of offences
Grant me your pardon, O kindest of the kind
There is nothing I can say of which
you are not aware already
I have never hankered for the comfort of a
family life
I want no son, friend or wealth
My only wish is that I should remain loyal to you
This life is futile, the only truth is the path of Dharma
Let me be satisfied with a taste of this.

Oh kind Father, Guardian of the universe, supreme God, Lord of the poor, save your poor daughter from the sin she is submerged in. You are the Saviour of the fallen and friend of ths poor. Be kind to your daughter. You are the strength of the weak, you are all-powerful, the asset of the poor, the only boat in a sea of trouble. Please take your weak daughter across the waves of the world. I can hardly live without you. You are the eye of the eye, the cynosure of the eye. Do not go beyond my vision. Let my eyes be for ever immersed in your fascinating beauty. Mind of the mind, Lord of the mind, please enter my mind so that it is never for a moment without you. Oh Life of my life, King of my life, come and be seated in my heart, let my heart be filled with the sweetness of your embrace and float on the waves of love.

My body still retains its earlier shape, but it is not what it used to be. It used to serve me in whatever way I wanted it. But now this boat of a body does not move so well. Let me relate my present physical condition.

My body is worn out, hardly able to move
Distortions have set in the face which
is loose already
The skin is aging, hair has turned gray
The teeth are beginning to leave the mouth
On the whole the situation is beyond
description
Day by day I am becoming deformed.

It is becoming a strain to maintain this body which is fading. God is taking away all the equipment with which he had decorated this boat my body. It seems he, the Life of my life, has seated himself in the throne of my heart. He will not depart till he has taken away all the things he had given me. Let that be. But I never stop wondering when I think of something. I have come to this Bharatvarsha and am still here. If I think back right to the beginning, I find that nobody ever talked harshly to me. I do not remember anybody showing any kind of displeasure towards me—people who were close to me, acquaintances, neighbours or anyone from my own village. I thank the great God for that. He has been kind to me in every way. It seems to me that God has asked these people to be so good to me, and the thought makes me very happy indeed. I have been in this state of cheerfulness all these years. But now I have come to the state of widowhood and have become more or less like an ascetic. Even then, God's wonders never cease. So many wonderful things have been done through my body—God is aware of then all.

Now I have the seniormost position in the family. Those who were older than me have passed away. It is

time for me too, but it is not certain when that time will come. People are often deceived because they do not know the time of their death. Perhaps many things can be avoided if they have prior knowledge. They can get accomplished what they wanted. But the tree of hope is a strange one—God has meant it to be so. Days and nights are spent in this hope.

I have been living all these years in the hope of gaining that immortal fruit. You who own that fruit, what have you got in store for me? What am I eventually going to get? The more I think of it the weaker I feel, physically and mentally. You are called the Saviour of the poor—no taint should attach to that name. You cannot possibly disappoint us after raising such high hopes, you have to grant me my wish. What I can see very clearly is that you have made all sorts of arrangements before creating us. In fact, You have been unable to rest after this. You are with us all the time in life and death, in wealth and adversity, and continue to look after us. Since your kindness is always with us, we need have no other help. It is not likely that you will disappoint us after giving us such hopes.

You are Master of the destitute, an asset to the poor, a boat in the sea of danger, and strength to the weak—these are all manifestations of your glory. Naturally you cannot go against your natnre. You are all-pervading, all-powerful. Nothing is beyond you. All the things that we have in this universe are created by you, they move according to your will and can be destroyed at your will. But you cannot do that, it is just impossible. Even if we commit the most henious crime you cannot forsake us, wherever we are you are there too.

TWELFTH COMPOSITION

How much shall I tell you, my God, the days of this
poor person are gone
But I have this regret
The rare human birth, result of much effort,
is lost in slumber
How dangerous the illusion which did not wake us up
What enmity do I have with you, why did you act in
such an unfriendly manner
I do not even dream of enmity towards you,
knowing you to be the greatest friend
Now I know that the web of illusion was one of
your tricks.
As long as the bondage of illusion lasted
We did not pay heed to you
I did not get him in this life shall I ever
get him? Shame on my life! Shame!

His company is for ever blissful
Strive for it without aspiring for the fruit,
I come from a respectable family,
a woman lacking in strength
Busy with mundane matters of daily living
my mind is forgetful.
I do not know what is good or bad
But live the caged life of a wild beast.
I somehow put my frustrations down
on paper
Although I can hardly claim to
have any education
I avoid the company of good people
But forgive me for my weaknesses and
proclaim my virtues.

Whatever I am, at home or abroad, in a forest, on the sea or in the mountains, I am in your kingdom, close to you. Under no circumstances, shall I leave your company. But you treat us according to the work done. I have spent so many years in this land of Bharatvarsha but I have lived comfortably, thanks to your kindness. Now, in the last phase of my life I am uncertain of the future. You know best. Whatever that be, you are my Father, I will be content with any situation you may put me into. I pray that I may remain full of happiness by chanting your name all the time.

How can I convince you my mind,
you do not have strength enough
Yet you have plunged into the battlefield as a leader
You could have vanquished the passions,
But you were not equipped.
People would laugh at the way you behave
You are running away from the field of battle
O what confusion, victory comes before battle
Why tie the laurels round your brow?

THIRTEENTH COMPOSITION

The life-force of the universe pervading it with purity
You are particularly manifest in the human heart
There is no place where your qualities are not evident
You are merciful, your mercy enlightens the world
You shower your love even on those who are hard,
cruel and unhappy.
You are at the root of consciouness, none is your equal
And I am lost and without knowledge
The furious waves of life shake me to the core
Where are you now the great Ocean of mercy
I appeal to you, dear Lord, the great fund of love
Do not allow me, a miserable woman, to fall into the

sea of grief.
The divine sages have praised you in the Vedas as
Saviour of the poor
Let there be no stain on that name,
do something to save this frightened and weak woman.

Description of the Dream

Whatever we find in God's creation seems to be a dream. People experience wonderful things in a dream. Waking up, they find it all gone. Similarly, whatever is seen on this earth vanishes in no time. Everything seems like a dream. But I must add there are two kinds of dreams—dreams while asleep and dreams when awake. One night, Jagannath Mishra dreamt that his son Nemai Chand was living in Nabadweep dressed as a sadhu with his head shaven. This dream made him cry out, Nemai Nemai. But all that he had seen in a dream came true.

Bharata, son of king Dasaratha of the Sun dynasty, was in his maternal uncle's place when Rama Chandra went on exile. Lakshmana and Janaki accompanied Ram Chandra. King Dasaratha was so heart broken that he died. Bharata saw the whole thing, in a dream, that King Dasaratha was dead and Rama, Lakshmana and Sita had left for exile in the forest. The people of Ayodhya were mourning the loss. Bharata woke up crying. Wonders of wonders! He heard that whatever had happened in his dream did actually take place in real life.

Once I had such a strange dream. I am going to tell you about it. Pyarilal, my twenty-year old third son, was studying at Baharampur College. I was at home, my son was at Baharampur. Meanwhile I had a dream. I saw that my Pyarilal was extremely ill. He was dying. In my dream I too happened to be in the same place. I was watching him. Then he died. He was laid on the ground, covered with a cloth. I watched all of that. But even in the dream I began to tremble and fell to the ground weeping.

Then I saw my Pyarilal being taken to the Ganga for cremation. I was with him, going round the fire and weeping. I cannot describe how desperate I felt. I wanted to jump into the pyre but could not. When it was all over, all the people went home. I was all alone on the river-bank, calling the name of my son loudly and crying.

After some time I saw a small boat coming towards me; a man was rowing the boat and another man was standing in it. I looked up through my tears and saw my Pyarilal standing there. By now I had wept so much that my entire body was wet and dirty. I stood up to get a better look. I found myself on the other side of the river. The boat was crossing the Ganga. I cannot say how delighted I was to see my Pyarilal in the boat.

I felt strength returning to my body. I stood by and called out: Pyarilall like a mad woman. Slowly the boat came to the bank. I saw my Pyarilal and remembered the earlier events and kept on crying. It seemed my son was sorry to find me in such distress. I shouted and said: Come to me, Pyari. But he did not answer. After a long time he came to me and said softly: Mother would you like to hear the scriptures. When I saw that Pyari was alive and talking to me I felt so happy as if I had the moon in my hand. I took him in my arms and replied: Come, let us go. Pyarilal said: Follow me; and started walking. I followed him. Presently we came to a king's palace. We went near the palace and saw splendid rooms and corridors decorated with many colourful objects. Then I saw a beautiful hall. There was a throne in the hall. Many people were sitting around it. It looked like a court to me. Pyarilal had spoken to me only once: Mother, would you like to hear the scriptures, come with me. He had said nothing else. I felt as if I have regained my lost treasure. So I went along with him very happily. Pyarilal left me in the courtyard and walked up to me. I stood in the courtyard and cried. Come back, Pyarilal,

I called out to him. I could see him very clearly but Pyarilal did not respond to my call.

I woke up crying. Even after waking up I felt the same way and found that my clothes, the sheets were wet with my tears. I could hardly talk. I was extremely restless and irritable and my heart began to beat fast. I tried to reassure myself but my mind was troubled. Later on, I wrote down the date.

The people of my family saw that I was upset and somebody was sent to Bahrampur. It turned out that what I had seen in my dream had actually come true. Pyarilal had died on the same day at the same time. How strange that was. What I had seen as a bad dream and could not tell anyone about had actually turned out to be true.

Supernatural Powers of the Mind

Oh my mind! Are you really mine? I have deposited everything in your hand. But your ways sometimes place me at the pinacle of happiness and and other times plunge me into the depths of despair. I cannot make out if you are friend or a foe. I call you mine but then you are so powerful. You can go round the world in the blink of an eyelid. No one else can match up to you.

The mind is a wonderful thing. Nothing else is superior to it. One day a wonderful thing happened in my mind; I must give all the details of this story.

An Inner Vision

I belong to the village Ramdia in the district of Faridpur. The police station is at Belgachi. It takes about three hours to reach Belgachi from Ramdia. One day, my eldest son Bipinbehari had to go to the police station at Belgachi on horseback. I was at our Ramdia home. Then I saw things which were not part of a dream because it was daytime and I was awake. At about four *danda* in the morning I saw in my mind Bipin falling from his horse near

the police station. He fainted—or so it seemed to me. People from the adjoining area came and stood around him.

There was a hue and cry at finding Bipin in such a state. Some people massaged his chest, others sprinkled water, some fanned him. I could see the whole thing very clearly from inside the house. From time to time I admonished myself, saying: For shame, do not think of such inauspicious events, why should Bipin fall from the horse? My Bipin is all right. I tried to reassure myself in this way. But it was no use because I could see those things happening very clearly. It was as though I was there among the bystanders watching everything. I could see all the people in the crowd and my Bipin among them.

Then I saw some people carry Bipin inside the police station. They put him on a chair. He seemed to be so weak that he lay stretched on it. I could see all these things happening while I was doing household chores. I felt so upset that I spoke to others about what I saw and why my mind was so full of misgivings. Some asked me what those misgivings were. I said that Bipin has fallen from his horse and is badly hurt, this is what I have seen in my mind. They said this comes from too much brooding, Bipin is hale and hearty, you need not worry. But these words did not put my mind at rest. As the afternoon wore on I saw two people trying to put Bipin on horseback but he could not hold himself straight. Then I saw a man looking for a palanquin. They could not find one. So a strong man picked Bipin up like a child and started for our house. I was with them, watching everything. I could visualise all this. It was not night but day, not a dream because I was moving about wide awake.

I was feeling miserable. I only wished my son would reach home safely. Then it was night. I waited near the door with a heavy heart. The dogs started barking as they approached the house. Up to this point I was able to see it all. But they passed out of my range of vision when they

brought Bipin from the outer to the inner house. In fact, what I had seen so far became a complete blank. I forgot everything.

Meanwhile Bipin was brought to the inner courtyard. The man carrying him wanted to know where he should put him. I asked myself: What is this he has brought here. A young *khansama* who had also come with them walked up to me. I wanted to know what it was, what they had brought. He answered: Ma Thakurani he is carrying Bara Babu. I said: Why is Bara Babu being carried? He replied: Our Bara Babu has fallen from his horse and broken his pelvis. He could not ride and as no palanquin was available Toki Sardar had to carry him. I rushed out to see him. The bed was already made. Bipin limped towards it and lay down. I went and sat near him. Others also came up and enquired anxiously about what had happened. The men who had come with Bipin began to talk and Bipin also supplied details. Everybody expressed great concern. I was surprised to hear from Bipin an exact description of the events I had seen during the day.

Bipin related the sequence of events exactly as I had seen them—how he fell from the horse, how the villagers rushed to him trying to help and how they had taken him inside the police station. I now heard directly about the events I had visualised during the day. How strange it was that I could see the incidents very clearly. I shed tears of happiness which people took to be due to my concern for the son. Actually I was not weeping for my son but because of the wonderful act of God. It was not night but day and not even a dream. He was not able to sit so they laid him in a small room. I was wide awake. How could I see these events so clearly from my own house? Can anything be stranger? Of course, I was sick with sorrow watching my son suffer. But I was also genuinely surprised by the strange powers of the mind.

Let me now relate another strange thing that I saw.

The Idea of Death

Most of the people I know are terribly afraid of death. But if one weighs the idea properly there is really nothing to fear. It is lack of understanding that leads to such panic. I have seen myself that there is absolutely nothing to fear from death. I am not likely to forget this in this life.

One day I was down with fever which had taken a bad turn. I was in such a state I thought I was going to die. I was lying on a cot. Suddenly my whole body went limp. I wanted to get down from the cot and lie on the floor. But I could not move my limbs, though I was not unconscious. I could think of words to say but could not speak. My tongue was numb. My children were very young then except the two eldest ones who sat by me crying and shouting: Mother! Mother! I was quite conscious. I thought: The boys are crying, why don't I answer them? But my tongue was numb, I could not speak. Yet inwardly I was talking—though the words did not come out. The room I was lying in had a door to the south. I looked up and found the door and everything in the room taking on a red tinge. After a while it all went dark, I could not see anything. I opened my eyes wider. "Oh she is going"—a cry went up—and I was taken out of the room. I did not feel anything but I could see everybody very clearly. In fact, I could see that I was being carried out. My eyes were closed, I could see that as well. My head dipped as I was being taken out. A man standing nearby quickly caught hold of it—I could see all that. Then I was laid down in the courtyard. How strange. I was dead yet I was able to see everything. They all sat around me lamenting loudly. My eldest son put his head between his knees and wept, striking his head. His aunt put her arms round him and joined in the weeping. My second son rolled on the floor and cried. The rest of the children cried too, but as they were rather young they were in the arms of the older

people. The master of the house sat near the door. Is she dead? he asked. Well, let her go. The courtyard was full of people who kept up a chorus of lamentation. I was lying in the courtyard. Our manager Harimohan Sikdar had never stepped inside the inner house. I had not seen him earlier. He was kneeling beside me, feeling my heart-beat, my mouth. He too was in tears. Oh what calamity, our mother has left us! he wailed. I could see my husband call out to the manager, tears streaming down his face. How strange, I could see everythiug with my eyes shut including my own body lying limp. My eyes were closed, yet I could see. I felt like cheering them up because they were lamenting for me. But I could not do anything. For some time I lay there, not being able to figure out what was happening.

Then I came back to my senses. I felt as though I had woken up from a deep sleep. I felt stronger, regained control my the limbs and could speak. I found myself lying on the ground. Why have you brought me here, I asked them. Everybody was immensely happy to see me becoming conscious and talking. It was hot inside the room, they explained, so you were brought here to get some fresh air. Of course, they were trying to give false assurances. I was taken inside the room. Anyway, how could I have watched the entire event? It was strange, to say the least. I consider myself very fortunate. The more I think about it the stranger it seems. But I am reluctant to tell the people about this experience lest they feel I am lying. These things are hardly credible. But actually I am telling the truth, I have related only that which I have really seen.

FOURTEENTH COMPOSITION

You are the Father and the Mother of the world
Everybody sings your praise—victory to thee

Birds, beasts. animals, objects, animate
and inanimate
All follow the laws set down by you
Men have acquired wisdom by your grace
Yet they do not obey your command
Shame to you, you men of the world
You have the power of knowledge
Yet you act like animals.

I Saw an Apparition

People say there are no such things as spirits and apparitions. I too used to think that. But the actual fact is different: spirits do exist. What I saw one day must have been an apparition.

One afternoon I was going for my bath. To the south of our house is a garden with many ancient tamarind trees. On my way I stood under one of those tamarind trees. There was a *babla* tree just opposite—one of its branches had slanted towards the ground. The spot was not overgrown with trees—there were only a few shrubs. In the broad light of day I looked at the tree and saw a dog reclining on the slanted branch. It looked almost human: its stomach was pressed close to the branch and its legs dangled loosely below. There were conch-shell bangles on its legs. I was taken aback and stared at the sight. What a peculiar thing. I said to myself: A dog lyiug on a tree is quite odd and this dog is wearing bright bangles! Has anyone ever heard of such a thing? For one long hour I stared at the dog. It stayed where it was. I had a good look. I wished others would also come and see this strange phenomenon. I turned back for a second and then when I looked back, it was gone! I went directly under the tree and searched but the dog was not there. There was no other animal or bird in that spot. I had seen it in clear daylight, but where had it disappeared to within the blink of an eye? Nothing was moving,

not even the leaves on the trees. After a lot of effort I went home and told everybody about the dog. Some said it must have been an apparition. Some thought I was lying. it was an illusion. But some said this is true, it must have been a spirit. There were many opinions. I myself have no doubt that it was a spirit though people find it hard to believe that a spirit should appear in the daytime.

Anyway, I have written down an account of what I have seen. Some part of the story of my 60 years of life is thus written down.

Now I am mother to everybody. The name which I once had at my parents' place is long forgotten. Now I am the mother of Bipinbehari Sarkar, Dwaraknath Sarkar, Kishorilal Sarkar, Pratap Chandra Sarkar and of my daughter Shyamsundari. Now I am everybody's mother.

I am putting a stop to my life story for the present. The rest may get written after my death.

FIFTEENTH COMPOSITION

Leaving Santipur, Nabadwip and Ganga
Start for Vrindavan with the name of
Hari in my heart
For a long time the mind had a wish
To travel by way of pilgrimage
How is Gaya, how is Kashi and also Vrindavan
Why do people go and settle in these places?
Vrindaban is the world so say the Vedas
Why then do people reside elsewhere?
Varanasi Puri is known as the second Kailash
The Saint Ramat Dandi lives there.
I had always wanted to have a good look
at Annapurna
I have had my fill of Lord Shiva
At Gaya the great footprints are lovely to behold
It will be a great honour to see them

I used to pine for Vrindavan
How can I go there and in which way
When will I be so fortunate
To transport my sinner's body to the holy land
I will be able to witness the kind Lord
Who is not accessible to even yogis
Bless me all of you, putting your palm on my head
Let Rassundari be so fortunate as to
get access to the Lord of Vraja.

I have written an account of my life but it does not include anything about my husband. That has made the book incomplete. However I may not be the fittest person to describe all his virtues. Actually, the entire account would become so large as to be beyond me. All I can say is that he was a good man, the like of whom is not easy to come by. He had a flabby physique. From his appearance he looked like the head of a big household. Even people unknown to him could at once make out that he was the master of the house. He was very kind. His kindness to his subjects was beyond measure. His kindness was evident in his treatment of others too. He was as kind as he was generous. For example, if he was eating and someone came in and said he was hungry, he would not eat any more till the hungry visitor was fed. He was very competent in administration and he liked lawsuits. He was a man of influence, and as such he was never without twenty or twenty four lawsuits always kept going. He was never without lawsuits. He used to have disputes with very important people. He never lost, he would always win a lawsuit. His booming voice and great power made him a terror, particularly when he was in his element. He used to have legal battles with all the important zamindars. There was one Saheb, owner of a factory and landlord of two *parganas* with whom he was constantly engaged in criminal lawsuits. By the grace of God he used to win them all; he

never lost a single case. Then there was Mirali Amud (Meer Ali Ahmed), a powerful zamindar of Dakshin Bari. My husband had many criminal suits against him. The disputes mostly related to the ownership of lands. Three fourths of the village of Tentulia belonged to Mirali Amud and one fourth belonged to us. There were other disputes regarding many land-holdings.

For three generations legal battles had been fought with Mirali Amud. My husband had once gone to the north to look at some of his property. My eldest son, Bepinbehari, was then six years old. The other children were not yet born. Only the child was at home when the following incident took place. Mirali Amud's men extorted tax from our subjects and manhandled them under orders from their master. Our manager happened to be critically ill at the time. Others expressed their inability to do anything. Only I was at home, but I too was not conversant with legal matters. Moreover, it was not within my power to do anything. The families of the people came complaining to me about the torture they had had to undergo and how they were forced to pay. I was in agony myself on hearing their tales of woe. My son was not even old enough to write. But I wrote a letter to Mirali Amud in his name and sent the letter to him through a messenger. Mirali Amud was so pleased by the letter that he set our subjects free and sent two of his trusted men to our house to settle the legal dispute. My husband was not at home. I was afraid to have done such an important job without asking him. I began to think that I knew nothing about legal matters and this case had been going on for a long time without anyone trying for a settlement. And I had acted without my husband's knowledge. How angry that would make him on his return! I was sick with worry. After some days my husband returned. The people who had acted as intermediaries were not at all concerned. But I was half dead with fear at the thought of his displeasure.

On his return he learnt all about how the lawsuit with Mir Sahib which had gone on for generations was finally settled by me and he was very pleased. Actually he was a great man and passed away after doing many good deeds. I have put down only this much about the life of my husband.

SIXTEENTH COMPOSITION

What decree are you going serve on me, Death
I have already put you behind bars
I have put the chain of the mind round its legs
and set it on my heart's prison house.
Go back Death, without serving your decree
I have already had a summons served from the chief civil court
You are making a fuss for nothing, I do not accept your summons.

Dharma is such a wonderful thing—a rare thing indeed in this world. Think of king Yudhishthira who staked even his own life for Dharma—yet did not stray from the right path. Many great people have sacrificed their lives for this Dharma without qualms. Dharma is what holds us in times of danger, there is no asset more precious. It makes even the roughest sea seem like a tiny pond. How wonderful are the ways of God! Even the tiniest fragment of his handiworks sends us into ecstasy. Parts of his work retain their brilliance even in dreams.

On the morning of the 20th of Aswin 1280, I had a dream. I saw myself standing on the bank of a river. A boat lay anchored with a boatman seated in it. A maidservant was with me, standing on the bank. Where I stood there was a sandbank. Farther away, it was raining, but not everywhere; the heavy showers fell with a deep pattering noise.

I was staring at the falling rain. I found that it was raining gold. The shower progressed towards me. Then I could make out the golden champak flowers falling in the shower. Delighted, I told my maid, look at the wonderful ways of God. Golden champak flowers are coming down from heaven—this is a shower of flowers. I was immensely pleased. I told her: Come, let us pick these flowers. I was simply beyond myself with pure delight. The boatman understood my feelings and said: Why are you so anxious to collect these golden champak flowers? This shower is meant for you. You will get them—they are coming to you. I can hardly express the happiness I felt then.

While all this was happening, I woke up. It was dawn. I was recounting my dream to those who happened to be near me when I heard that my seventh daugher-in-law was in labour. Immediately the traces of the delight I had experienced in the dream were gone. I forgot my dream completely. Material thoughts made me physically and mentally sick. I was engrossed in the thought of how God was going to handle this dangerous situation. After a while a baby was born from the womb of the woman in labour. The face of my grandson reminded me of my carlier dream. I began to float in a sea of happiness. The birth of a grandson is indeed a matter of great delight. The golden champak of my dream was indeed a gift of God—I was convinced of it. Overjoyed, I prayed to God: Oh you Lord and Saviour of the poor, O supreme Father! I feel as if I have seen a glimpse of you through the work done by me appearing in my sleep. Dear Father, I am an ignorant child of yours. It is not for me to assess your glory. But I wish to thank you a thousand times.

Descripton of the Fever of 1280 at Ramdia

It is a matter of great regret that Ramdia has become
a storehouse of fever
This became apparent in the month of Kartik in the
year 1280.
The nature of the fever is such that everybody in the
house is taking to bed including visitors
from outside the village
The fever is mysterious and the way the
patients behave is strange indeed
They agonise, mourning: We are dying.
They don't even call their parents
Before the night is over the patient is dead
Parvati is watching this, going from house to house
No medicines are available—those who are left
lament their dead.
But government offices are giving away
tablets free of cost
The Babus are also kind, they are distributing
michri and sago grains.

END OF PART ONE

This is the only Composition in which Rassundari specified classical ragas and talas. The song on p. 91 is set to "Ragini Jangala, Tala Ektala". The final song above is set to "Ragini Dhanasri, Tala Khemta".

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FIRST COMPOSITION

Do come, dear mother Saraswati, fulfil my wish
Come with Narayana and reside in my voice
Let my heart be the throne for both you and your spouse
My life and death would be worthwhile at the touch
of your feet
Do sit with a pleased countenance in expectation
Let me offer flowers at your feet to my heart's content.
The life of Chaitanya is an ocean, a particle of one drop of
its wave is what is written by Krishnadasa
Rassundari, dim-witted, devoid of love and devotion—
all she wants is to have a place at your feet.

I was born in the year 1216 in the month of Chaitra—now 1304 is on its way out. My age is 88, thanks to the mercy of Mother Shasthi. I have lived such a long life in this land of Bharatvarsha and I still continue to be in well physically. It seems to me that there are very few people of my age in our country. In fact I doubt it very much.

So in this Bharatvarsha I have passed 88 years; God had given me the burden of three births in one. I consider it my great good fortune.

The supreme Father has kept this unfortunate creature Rassundari alive and safe all these 88 years. He is kind to me, he wants me to see his wonderful creation, he keeps me waiting—the all pervading, creator, destroyer, sustainer of the world. O merciful God: Great are your ways.

Your nectar-like name has entered my ears and made this human body blessed!

I have spent a long life here in this Bharatvarsha. I still continue to live. Have I wasted my time just being here for so long—what work have I accomplished?

Oh my heart! You have kept me completely immersed in the well of living. Oh my heart! Was it fair on your part? I have assigned all that I have to you, heart of mine. Oh my heart, your ways are causing me such distress, oh heart of mine, in this precious land of Bharatvarsha, this Bharatvarsha has so many priceless mines of treasure. Hundreds of destitute people collect a little of this treasure and turn into merchants. But I, inferior creature, a slave of illusion, have plunged into the pit of material concerns. Alas, my human birth has been in vain. To be born as a human being is indeed a rare thing, but with the rare human form my heart, you are enamoured of the useless *makal* fruit, instead of worship at the lotus feet of Radha-Krishna. My life's night is over. There is hardly any time left.

SECOND COMPOSITION

My lord and master Janardana, Sri Madhusudana,
Hari, perisher of peril
You are the ocean of kindness, the friend of the
poor, we cross the sea of life by your mercy
From the womb till now I have been floating in
the stream of your kindness
You are with me at every step, on earth and
in water, oh Ocean of mercy,
To your glowing feet I submit myself,
ignorant of prayer, a miserable soul
I tend to go astray by storms of false temptation.
You are aware of all that goes in inside me,
nothing is unknown to you
As you are great dear Hari do give refuge to this
Rassundari at your feet.

My heart, the worst sinner, the most inferior of all creatures, are you all set to bring about my ruin? Take care! Take care! Take care! This is a treasure I have been given by my father, by my mother. My mother had told me the kind name when I was still very young, when my intelligence was just about growing. That kind name is chiselled in my heart of hearts like the greatest of hymns and like the life-giving *Vishalyakarani*. Watch out, watch out, my heart. Giants of destruction are closing in. They must not pounce on my great treasure—my mind, oh my heart, I beg of you, do not for a moment forget this.

Song

The boat should not sink in the strong gale
of the ocean of life
Oh heart be watchful, be wakeful every moment
Guard your treasure, yourself be the watchman
at the strong gale of the ocean of life

Now I am 88 years of age—I have been in Bharatvarsha till this time. There is no certainty about how much longer I have to stay. Anyway, when I was sixty some sort of account of my life was written, and what God has in store for me in the last phase of my life, only God knows. My heart breaks when I think of how I have wasted my time all these years sitting here.

Our great Father, the Ocean of kindness, has very kindly sent us to the school of life for our education. If only we had the power to appreciate even a fraction of the effort our kind Father is making and the help he is giving so that we can improve ourselves and take lessons from this school of life! We have no idea of this; on the contrary, our feeling seems to be that our Father has sent us to this world only to indulge in fun and frolic. We are all merrily eating, drinking, taking part in frivolous entertainment and playing games. We delude ourselves, not realising that all will be reduced to dust.

Oh my heart, are you pretending that you are not aware of all this? Dear heart of mine, know this for sure that Someone who has sent you here to this worldly market-place, and you have to go back to Him once more. Have you forgotten that?

I was born in the year 1216. Now I am eighty eight years of age—it has been a long time in this land of Bharatvarsha. What have I been doing all these days? I have been wasting my precious life. Isn't that a pity? What is the use of crying over it like a child?

THIRD COMPOSITION

O you O heart of Rasa* let me ask you
why did you lose your head
A mentally unbalanced person knows no order,
You have been coming and going all through
the four ages of *Satya Treta Dvapara Kali*
But you are still under a delusion.
The One who has caused this world, He who pervades the
universe, creating, stabilising, destroying
There is no proper or improper place for him, He is
everywhere, there is nothing in the three worlds
that He does not know
Listen to me, my heart, there is none beyond Him.
He is the gem of heaven
Such is the kind God Hari, set your heart on Him
And perceive him through the eye of wisdom.

O my Master, the Saviour of the poor, O kind Hari, Destroyer of peril—your kindness is unequalled. Your actions cannot be comprehended through rituals or the Vedas. What do I, the meanest of the mean, know of your greatness, the virtue of your name? Dear God,

*Rassundari

whatever you do comes as a surprise. To-day I have witnessed one such strange act of yours. My heart which is made of stone, melted in delight at seeing your strange action. O my master Madanagopala, my mind is full of happiness and dancing in delight having seen the influence of your kindness. My happiness knows no bounds today.

These are my deep secrets, nobody else has any idea of these. That is why I am speaking about them in detail. There were different ways in our time. Now we don't wear the same kinds of clothes. However, I used to wear an ornament,* shaped like a half-moon on my nose. There were three more rings of that shape attached to the nose ring.

There is a tank adjoining this house. One day I had gone to bathe in the tank. I was neck-deep in water, washing clothes, when the ring got stuck in my clothes and dropped into the deep water. It was lost—many people were sent to search for it. But it could not be found. It was not possible to get it back. I gave up all hope.

I was twenty two years of age when I lost the nose-ring. I had two daughters. Later, the tank dried up and became useless. Wild trees came up and the bed of the tank was overgrown with vegetation. Many years later, my fifth son Dwarkanath, who worked in Goari Krishnanagar, had the tank dredged and reconstructed. The earth that was dug out of the bed was piled up on the bank and some time later, this was used to make a wall along the bank.

Years later, part of the wall collapsed, part remained. And it was on that broken wall that my lost nose-ring was seen lying.

The dirt which had covered it had been washed away by the rain and parts of the nose-ring were exposed. I was there, on our landing steps. The nose-ring was partly visible from where I stood. I saw it and remarked "What's

*"Beshar"—not in use any more.

that?" There was a girl from the fisherman's family standing by. She rushed to the spot, picked up the ring and gave it to me.

I took the nose-ring and saw that it was indeed the one I had had. I felt faint for a while. I can hardly express what feelings went through me. Tears streamed down incessantly. I wiped my eyes to look at my nose-ring carefully.

It was indeed one of God's miracles. It made my heart beat faster. This ring had slipped from my nose and dropped in deep water before my very eyes. I was twenty two years old then. I have it back now when I am eighty eight. In all these sixty or so years the ring has remained just as it was—the gold has not lost its shine. What a wonderful thing to happen!

Nothing is beyond God's power. This ring fell in the water 60 years ago! I had given up all hope of getting it back. It was not possible to get it back.

Where had this nose-ring been all these sixty years? Who has handed it over to me after a passage of sixty years? For sixty years the ring lay in mud, earth and water. The clay underwent much rough handling. It was dug out from the dried up tank, then mixed with water to make it usable—this was done by stepping on the mound. Then the mud was used in building a wall round the tank. All this time the nose-ring remained inside the wall. In spite of all the rough treatment the ring retained its exact shape. It might have been broken and perhaps even lost by this time if I had had it with me.

Oh my kindest Master, Saviour of sinners, you are the wealth to the poor, the strength of the weak, the boat to cross over adversity. Oh Ocean of mercy, you have been so good and kind to me. You intended to hand over the nose-ring to this wretched person. That is why you guarded the nose ring with such care all these sixty years. Now you have given it to me. Today my happiness knows

no bounds.

Dear Lord, such is your kindness shown to the unfortunate, meanest of the mean, this Rassundari. When I got the ring, it was as if I had obtained the moon from the heavens. But it was not that I was happy to get back my lost gold, actually I was overjoyed at the kindness of my kind Master. With the ring in my possession I began to ponder what to do with it, which would be the best place for it that would make me most happy. I was not going to melt it, it had to remain as it was. But my idol Madanagopala should wear it. It was too big as a nose ornamant, so it was stuck in his headdress. The ring looked lovely in the headdress.

My dear Madanagopala, you had kept the nose-ring of your loyal daughter in safe custody and after sixty years you gave it back to me. Holding the ring I felt very close to you.

FOURTH COMPOSITION

O lotus-eyed one who lives in the hearts of the devoted, the whole world is pervaded by you. You are beyond change, beyond desire and anger, you are eternal.

You hold all creation beyond perception.

You are all powerful, equal everywhere and all-pervading.

You have no end, no change, you are fearless and the only source of salvation.

Unmatched, benevolent, the embodiment of truth and Saviour of all.

You are tranquil and undisturbed, half of the world stands still, through you the great Brahma manifest yourself.

Your glory knows no end, the boundless space is witness to your will.

The sun, the moon, the stars, the wind all follow your laws.

You fashion your exquistite art even on a drop of water.

Birds, bearts and countless animals are all created because of your will.

Living and non-living all exist in their proper places as laid down by you.

You are the life-giver, you put every being in the womb of the mother.

Blood and liquids, milk in the mother's breast—are all there because of your decree.

Birth, stability, disruption—everything concerning life happens following your law.

You are indeed great, God, who can fathom you? You are the presiding deity of all *yajnas*, let our efforts be fruitful, this is our humble prayer.

I have apent a long time in this land of Bharatvarsha. Accept millions of salutions from me, my master Madanagopala. I beg your forgiveness for my transgression. I do not know how to recite your name. Oh Master how can I fathom your glory when I do not even seem to understand you? I went back to my earliest memory and realised that your mercy is manifest through my mind, even through the hairs of my flesh. Dear Madanagopala, Ocean of kindness, you have done me a great favour, you are taking care of me through the ups and downs of my life. You are always with this subordinate of yours. Your mercy is without parallel, O kind Master. I am such a despicable creature that I did not recognise such a good friend. I do not even think of him. I am so unfortunate, so mean.

FIFTH COMPOSITION

My lord Madanagopala, God of the poorest
Precious possession of the dispossessed, you are the
Ocean of kindness

Lord of the universe, Saviour of the fallen
You show the way to the unfortunate, you are Brahman the eternal.
I am unprincipled, I do not know how to sing your praise
Now I will get to know the name of the Saviour of the lowly
Lord, where do you reside, when and how
How can we know unless you tell us?
I have neither love nor devotion nor energy left in me
It is hard for me to understand you.
You are the master, the guru, the helmsman of the world
Grant my wishes, I beseech you, O eternal tree of wish-fulfilment.
I am ignorant of mantras, rituals and sacrificial offerings
Other people have many to look up to—but I only have you.
Whatever I utter or think are all directed towards gaining access to you

I do not know how to sing devotional songs
But O lotus-eyed one, do appear
Before Rassundari as a mark of your goodness.

I was born in the year 1216. Now it is 1304—and I am eighty eight years old. I have appeared in this Bharatvarsha so long ago. I have lived in Bharatvarsha long enough, it is not yet decided whether I'll leave or stay on. All work is done according to the wishes of the Master. The Lord God is our master. Whatever he does is good. But, dear Lord, I have only this prayer to you in my dying days: Please allow me a place at your feet. See that I do not forget you.

Dear Master, O great ocean of mercy, friend of the poor—your actions cannot be fathomed. You bite as a snake, provide cure as a snake-doctor, issue orders as a magistrate, beat up as a constable. Only you are aware of what you intend to do.

I am a tiny creature, can I have any inkling of your greatness? Dear master, your actions are even beyond the Vedic scriptures.

SIXTH COMPOSITION

You are Narayana, beloved of the goddess Lakshmi,
Madhava Madhusudana
Even the world and eternity fail to
describe your qualities.
You are Govinda, Gaurachandra, Gopala Govardhana
Even the world and eternity fail to
enumerate your qualities.
You are Radha's love, the young Raghava
Raghuvara, the son of Raghu
Even the world and eternity fail to
describe your qualities.
You are the jewel of the Yadu clan, the son
of Yasodha, the killer of Kamsa as Krishna
Even the world and eternity fail to describe your qualities.
You are the enemy of death, son of Sri Sachi
you are all world and all life.
Even the world and eternity fail to
describe your qualities
You deluded Bali, accepted his offerings
sporting an extra leg.
Even the world and eternity fail to
describe your qualities
Poor Rassundari is a despicable creature.
She does not know how to worship
Even the world and eternity fail to
describe your qualities.
Pray do not disappoint me, dear Srinivasa,
I must have shelter at your lovely feet.

You are kind to your followers, dear Lord—you are known as the kind one. This name is famous in all the three worlds. See that your sacred name is not stained because of this unfortunate worthless Rassundari. I am guilty of hundreds of offences, dear Lord, you have been kind

enough to overlook them and been nicé to this servant. Only you know what you plan to do with me later.

I was born in the year 1216, now in 1304 I am eighty eight years old. I have been living in the land of Bharatvarsha all these years—what have I done with my precious life? It breaks my heart to think of the waste. My life as a human being has been in vain. Birds and beasts, all animals eat, none of them goes without food. Meanwhile if some birds happen to come across saintly people—they learn the name of Radha-Krishna. I am unfortunate, I have not met a saintly person yet.

SEVENTH COMPOSITION

In the market place of the world I saw rows
and rows of variety stores.
Goods are neatly kept,with a lot of care
and so colourful too.
With mirrors, combs, pearl strings the shops
look so bright and enchanting
I had thought to cross over life easily
in a raft, but all was forgotten
I whose Father is the ocean of kindness
came to buy sweets from these shops.
Such is the luck of Rassundari that she
is charmed by the shops while
the day is lost in finding real treasure.

Song

Oh mind of mine you are led astray, taken
in by a *makal* fruit of no worth
Your Father is kind, the very ocean of
kindness, you left him to buy a trifle
O mind of mine you are led astray.

When I opened my eyes in the market place of the world what I saw were the variety stores. I had hardly any time to think of anything else. Whichever way I looked I saw those sparkling stores. This market place of the world seemed to be full of these shops. I was impressed and thought these shops to be the best things in the world.

For some time I was fascinated by those strange things. I too set up my own variety store, decorated it nicely and made a ceremony of it.

This land of Bharatvarsha, full of such precious gems—there are hundreds of mines full of priceless gems, only a little of which have made creditors out of poor people. I have lived in this Bharatvarsha for eighty eight years and what have I been doing? I am still at my variety store.

What a shame! I have wasted my valuable life in the hell-hole of material things, a wretched slave of illusion. Alas, my human birth has been useless. This rare human birth was not spent in singing the praise of Radha-Krishna. Why did I not do it? I am ashamed of myself. "Since I did not get him in this life there seems little chance of getting him after death. Oh shame on my human birth! I squandered my time." All my days were futile, my human existence was a waste. It is a matter of great regret. It breaks my heart.

EIGHTH COMPOSITION

Dear lord, father of the world, holder of the
Sudarshana Chakra
Gem of my heart do let me see you so that I
will be soothed
Be gracious, come to my heart, consider it
as your throne
I will offer my heart as flower and sandal paste

You are the heart of my heart, you drive the body
which goes whichever way you want it to go
Do not deprive me by giving temporary desires
My only prayer is that Rassundari should be loyal to you.

I have lived in this land of Bharatvarsa for a long time. I am still here. There is nothing more to be said about the past and present situation of my mind and body. The one who resides in my heart is aware of what goes on in my mind.

There is no need to talk about my physical condition because the girls of today might think that I am being boastful. But actually it is not so. This idea should not enter anybody's mind. However, I would like to say something about the way we were supposed to work in those days and what I had to do.

Girls were not supposed to be educated in those days. People used to say, what is this? A girl child learning to read and write? It was considered a great offence. Girls should not touch pen and paper, that will bring about their ruin.

But God has created new rules now, which I find quite satisfactory. Girls do not suffer any more, there are good rules for them. These days parents of a single girl child pay great attention to her education. This pleases me very much. In our time girls were not supposed to read and write; I myself am not educated. I do not know the virtues of education, our household work did not involve any reading or writing.

I am living in the same family. The family is quite large. There is an image of the deity, Madana Gopala. He is offered a meal of rice every day. We have many visitors and guests.

My mother-in-law suffered from ill health. She could not see. Serving food to both these images is my topmost priority.

My husband did not have any brothers. Apart from me, there were three sisters-in-law. They used to live in

their own houses at that time. There were about twenty five servants and maidservants. I had to cook rice for them twice every day. We did not engage Brahmin cooks. All the cooking had to be done at home. This was the work pattern and I followed it. Meanwhile I had twelve children, ten sons and two daughters. Looking after them was my responsibility.

The nine maidservants employed came from outside. None of them stayed in the house. I was the only one who did the housework. The master of the house liked to have a meal of rice after his morning bath and prayer. So cooking had to be done in the morning.

I used to do all the work by myself. Early in the morning I used to cook and feed the children, then after my bath I took care of the offerings to be given to the family deity, after which I put everything which my mother-in-law was likely to need before her. Then I entered the kitchen. At first I cooked for my husband and then for the rest of the family. All the work was done by me without any help. I did not want to displease others.

God, you are kind. You gave me strength to do the work of ten. I never felt tired. Your kindness is endless. You had made me as strong as stone. By your grace I enjoyed excellent health. I must now relate the physical condition I have been reduced to.

NINTH COMPOSITION

My body is frail, there is no strength left to move
Everything blacks out if I stand up
In the present adverse circumstances
My limbs refuse to move as they
used to once
I have come to this state by and by
The ten senses that I had are about to
forsake me

The most worrying thing is greed which
refuses to leave
The stomach too, keen to have its fill
looks expectantly at others
My daughter, gem of a girl, takes good care
She keeps supplying me with all that I want.

Dear Lord Madana Gopala, You carry us through this ocean of the world. You are a saviour of the sinner and loyal to your followers. I bow at your feet millions of times. I am a despicable creature, I do not understand you. I have been guilty of hundreds of sins. My sins are endless. You must forgive my sins as you are kindness incarnate. Please do not forsake me. Do not leave my mind. This is the only prayer of Rassundari, an inferior creature, that I should not forget you.

The World as a Theatre

Dear God, you are all over the universe, you keep it going, you are its creator and destroyer! You are the owner of this huge theatre. Everything happens according to your wish. You have brought me to this theatre. For the last eighty eight years, I have been given a seat from which I have not moved.

Proprietor Sir! Your world is indeed a wonderful theatre. You have appeared in strange disguises for me to see. You came as my mother, father, brother, sister and relations. After you had shown them to me you have taken me away. Only you know what your next action is going to be. The timings of various plays are known only to you. Nobody else has the power to know this. Proprietor Sir of the theatre! I was deeply hurt when you brought my parents, brothers, sisters and friends on the stage and took them all away. But you also saw to it that I should not suffer for them.

A little later you dressed me up as a mother and gave me the principal role. Proprietor Sir, I was dressed up and came to the stage in the role of a mother according to your wish. Your stage has so many other characters. I am wondering them all.

Proprietor Sir! I have seen the strangest things in your theatre of the world. I too have been given an insane roles. You have brought my son, daughters, grand children—all dressed up on the stage and again taken them away.

Proprietor Sir, you sent me to the stage in the role of a mother. You brought my son to me and said, "This is your son, take him in your arms, take good care of him. I am giving this son to you." You put my son on my lap, how happy I was at that time. This happiness was beyond description.

Proprietor Sir! You have many such fine agony through which one has to go to get a son. But all that suffering melts away if one looks at the child. I am immersed in a sea of happiness when I sit with the child on my lap. I am bursting myself with joy. I forget everything—even you.

Proprietor Sir, when I hold the child I feel as though I have become somebody really great. I feel as though I possess the world. I feel that the house, the family, everything belongs to me. I dance with joy. I forget that I have a body. I hold the child with great care, he seems to be more precious than my life.

Proprietor Sir! Your actions are endless. You snatched my son from my arms after a short time. Proprietor Sir, I do not know from where you brought me my son or where you have taken him. When you took my son from my arms I felt desperate enough to give up everything including my own life. The pain is like nothing else, Proprietor Sir—the pain is incomparable to this. Only the sufferer knows it and you Sir, Proprietor Sir.

[illegible] you know when a particular day is going to end. I've had given me twelve children—six sons and six daughters. Of these one here take my [illegible]—his sons and one daughter leaving me with five sons and one daughter.

[illegible], you are also known to be full of kindness. You seem to well known all over the three worlds. Even if you are unwell I would still call you kind [illegible], you are again on the seven [illegible] you are protecting me with six grandsons. [illegible] has two sons and one daughter. [illegible] has five sons and one daughter. [illegible] has four sons and two daughters. [illegible] has four sons, three daughters. Of my two daughters one has a son, the youngest daughter has a son and a daughter. Altogether I have fourteen grandsons from my own self eight granddaughters. From my daughters I have two grandsons and one granddaughter which makes a total of twenty five.

[illegible]

The Praises of the Lord

Dear Lord, you cover the entire world, using
various planes and luminaries
You entire area [illegible] by the [illegible] of a
chariot, entirely and [illegible] your [illegible] power
You sometimes take the shape of an
[illegible] in [illegible] to you.
By embracing the demon [illegible], you create the
[illegible] of Shiva and Shiva
Both Brahma and Vishnu, you are in the beginning
and in the end. You are Bhagavan and eternal
Lord of the three worlds you take the shapes of [illegible]
you are with your [illegible] even in [illegible]
Dear one because that has the demon have,

your throne is his heart
Rassundari seeks your mercy
Do give her a place at your feet.

Oh Lord, benevolent and benign, saviour of the fallen, even the Vedas can not fathom your ways. "How can I sing your praise even if I had five faces—even the eternal cannot see your end."

Proprietor Sir, how many roles you have made me put on; You have taken away some sons, daughters and grandchildren after allowing me a fleeting glimpse. Now Bipinbehari is left with only two daughters, Dwarikanath has three sons and a daughter, Kishorilal has two sons and three daughters, Pratapchandra has three sons and three daughters. I have only one daughter now—Shyamsundari. She has one son and one daughter. Twelve children were dressed up, brought to the stage and given to me. Now only four sons and one daughter are left on the stage. Till now you have nineteen grandchildren as exhibits: eight grandsons and nine granddaughters through my sons, and one grandson and one granddaughter through my daughter. Proprietor Sir, nobody but you is aware of when each play is going to end.

Proprietor Sir, only you know what you are going to do with me in the last phase of my life. Whatever you do is for the best. But I have one favour to ask, grant me a place at your feet.

It is a difficult drama that you have devised Proprietor Sir. The dramatis personae consists of gods, giants, sadhus, and saints as well. Nobody can avoid this great drama. You yourself appear in so many guises, what can we see of the others? Proprietor Sir, in the age of Treta you were born to the queen Kaushalya. As the sons of Dasharatha you split yourself in four parts as Rama, Laksmana, Bharata and Shatrughna.

Proprietor Sir, you were born to queen Kaushalya to accomplish a mission to destroy the clan of the Rakshasas.

After that was done, Kshatriya might was displayed, you ruled Ayodhya for some time. What you wish to do is accomplished instantly. The play of Ramachandra was over, you stepped out of your royal robes,washed your hands to come back as the proprietor of your mighty stage.

Proprietor Sir, the name of that play is *Rama Avatara*. Valmiki has saved the world with this name of Rama in his seven-volume *Ramayana*. The name of Rama is an embodiment of many virtues. One can overcome the fear of death by uttering that name even casually at the last hour. Sins committed during millions of previous births are washed away with a single utterance of the name of Rama.

The virtues of the name of Rama are endless
Shiva takes pleasure in reciting the name
Four-faced Brahma has Rama in his thoughts
Narada sings his praise in his songs
accompanied on the veena.

ELEVENTH COMPOSITION

The Theatre of the World

Restrain O lotus-eyed one the rage of the demon
You have killed Hiranyakashipu as Narasimha
I bow to you lotus-eyed Ramachandra
With Janaki to your left and Lakshmana your right
You are the sea of kindness, saviour of the poor
Born in the Raghu clan you are as tender
as newly grown grass
I am an insignificant woman, I do not know
how to say my prayers
I do not have the power to describe your virtues
You are Brahma, Vishnu and the five-faced God
You are Indra, the moon and the sun

you are the god of wealth
You are the hymns of the saints and their salvation
You save the world from disaster, from flood
You create, preserve and destroy as well
You extend all over the world through your
qualites of *sattva, rajas, tamas.*
The three worlds are created by you
We cannot look beyond you for saving us.
Who else should we look up to when you are there
Who else is capable of protecting us?
Great is your glory
Pray, let Rassundari have access to your lotus feet.

Proprietor Sir, you have many forms. Only you know what guise you are going to take in your next stage appearance. In the age of Dvapara you came to the stage as the son of Devaki at Mathura. You were born in the prison of Kamsa. Instantly you took the four-armed form equipped with Shankha, Chakra, Gada and Padma. You showed your divine presence to Devaki and Vasudeva and then came to Gokul as the son of Yashoda. Who can anticipate what goes on in your mind except you yourself? After staying for some time at Gokula as the son of Nanda you moved over to Sri Vrindavana and joined the milkmen and milkmaids. You used to tend the cattle by the banks of the Yamuna with the other children of Vraja. Your activities are beyond compare.

You are the king of Kings, the great Ruler, the Master of the universe, Brahma himself. As a cowhevd you engaged in fun and frolic with the children of Vraja. So many gods and saints, the four-faced and the five-faced gods among them, have fasted and gone through great penance in order to have a glimpse of your charming antics at Vrindavana. I am a very insignificant person, and a woman at that. How can I fathom the greatness of your action at Vraja? If a bird of the forest gets the company

of good people it learns to chant the name of Radhakrishna. A polluted body is cleansed of impurities in the company of good people. But I am unfortunate, worthless, worse than birds and beasts. I never had the chance to enjoy the company of good people. Proprietor Sir, May I bow to you millions of times, you are generous enough to forgive me.

Mahadeva was so keen to see you at play in Sri Vrindavana that he put on the guise of a yogi. As a child you sat in Yashoda's lap and called her mother. Mother Yashoda dressed you up as a cowherd and you went out to play with the other children of Vraja roaming about in the forests. Dear Proprietor Sir, after your work—which was so enchanting and full of love—at Vrindavana was over, you left for Mathura with your uncle Akrura. The occasion was the destruction of Kamsa. How wonderful are your ways. You went to Mathura, finished off the king of your uncle's clan, left your cowherd's dress, put on the royal robe and sat on the throne of Mathura.

Proprietor Sir, yon have obliged the whole world by your various roles in the theatre of life, your ways cannot be fathomed by others, only you know what you have in your mind.

In the Dvaraka phase you played the part of a family man, you married, had children and completed all the duties of a householder. But when your Yadu clan entered the stage, you found it too cramped for space.

Your will is always done, Proprietor Sir. You destroyed your clansmen, all fifty-six crore of them, changed your stage costume and reappeared on the stage as the old Proprietor once again. Your ways are endless. I bow to you millions of times; let me have some place at your feet.

TWELFTH COMPOSITION

Tha Theatre of the World

Oh Krishna, the beloved of Radha who can
understand you
You know what was in the beginning and
what is at the end
The Puranas have it all but how can I, a woman,
unable to read the hymns know about that.
All the physical senses are dedicated to you
You are knowledge and all the rituals
I am an ignorant woman, I don't know
how to sing your praise
But you are all I have
I have faith in you, I know that you are the
friend of the poor and will take me across
Even the heaviest of stone slabs float by your grace—
am I heavier than those?
You never turn back on your followers,
You are their strength, you are known
as Hrishikesha.
But I have neither love nor devotion
how can I aspire for your mercy
But you are merciful, beloved of Radha,
Please grant me my wish
Rassundari the slave of your slave has always
desired a place at your feet.

Proprietor Sir, after completing your play of Sri Vrindavana with your cowherd's clothes, your charming flute, the slanted posture of Krishnachandra, you have now decided to put up new productions.

After the ages of Satya, Treta and Dvapara came the Age of Kali. This time you came on stage with a totally new name. Born in the womb of Shachi, you were the son of Jagannatha Mishra. You assumed the name of Taraka

Brahma Hari on this earth. Proprietor Sir, you assumed the name of Gauranga Chandra and spread the name of Hari, thus saving the poor, the sinners, the disabled of the world. People even today keep the flag of Hari flying.

Proprietor Sir, who knows what your next stage role will be? Only you know what you intend to do. But where have you hidden your playful postures, the cowherd's dress, the enchanting flute of your days at Vraja?

Song

You were a dark beauty in a dancing pose
In Nadia you have changed yourself
to Gauranga, the fair complexioned one
(Oh king of Vraja, all the traces of
Vraja are gone, alas!)
Where have you hidden that form, now
you are fair like untreated gold.
King of Vraja, you used to play the flute,
calling Radha to you
Now you beat the *mridanga*, chanting
the name of Hari.

Proprietor Sir, your dark skin has now received a coating of the colour of your Radha. On stage you appear as Gaurchandra, the fair one.

For some time you stayed as the son of Shachi in Nabadwip. You were then known as Nemai Pandit. A celebrated scholar had come to Nabadwip. None could beat him in arguments—he was hoping to go back from here in triumph. But you defeated the unbeatable scholar.

Defeating Nemai Pundit you earned the title of the best of teachers. For some time you stayed at Nabadwip with your family. Then you discarded that role, shaved off your beautiful curly hair, cast off your silken clothes and wore the loincloth with a waistband and took up the staff and *kamandalu* of an ascetic. You were then given the name of

Sri Krishna Chaitanya.

Proprietor Sir, when you first made your appearance on the stage you were known and respected as a Brahmin. They used to touch your feet. Then you became an ascetic and changed your name to Sri Krishna Chaitanya. This name became famous throughout the world and you were respected as an ascetic.

Proprietor Sir, you left home, left your mother Sachi Thakurani and your wife Vishnupriya to become an ascetic.

THIRTEENTH COMPOSITION

Following Satya, Treta and Dvapara, came Kali,
the proud king of a proud age
The good are not given their due, evil takes
complete hold, Kali is a dark time
With the royal entrance of Kali came sin, violence,
anger as soldiers without number
Fluttering a proud ensign Kali kept everybody under
iron control putting a stop to religious rites
The sad plight of the living being, brought the lord
Gourhari
down like the full moon in the womb of Sachi
With the destruction of confusion the three
worlds broke into cries of delight and the
universe resounded with the name of Hari
Chanting the divine name Gour came powerful as a lion,
a terrific roar
Enough to frighten the mighty Yama, proud Kali was
humiliated and afraid.
As a favour to the followers the world was flooded
with the chant
The three worlds were pleased to take up the chorus,
the chants went up to the sky
Intoxicated with his own name, he spreads

the name of all living beings
Surrounded by the players of flute, drums and veena
Gour begins to dance
the chanting grows louder till it reaches the end of the earth
The message of love was hidden in Vraja
Now it is universally spread
after coming to Nadia
The loving chant of Hari was a matter of
private affection.
Now Gour himself with his crazy companion Nitai
goes on spreading the message
All the sinners have turned to studying the
Bhagavata and theories of devotion
Even the Yavanas, forgetting their own scriptures
are drunk with the name of Hari.
The message of love, that of Tarak Brahma and
Hari has spread through the world
The age of Kali is blessed
Rassundari wishes only to rest at your feet,
please grant me my wish Sri Krishna Chaitanya.

Dear master, saviour of the fallen, dear merciful God—the earth is blessed by your birth as the son of Sachi, it is flooded by your love. Dear God, O great ocean of mercy! You came into this world as Gour Hari in the age of Kali. Unable to bring all at your side you turned into an ascetic and went from door to door taking the message of Hari to the sinners, the disabled, the blind: Dear Gourkishora, I am a despicable creature, I don't know you and do not know how to appeal to you.

Dear Lord Gourkishora, you are the proprietor of the theatre of life. You have made me sit on your stage for eighty eight years. For all these years I have occupied the the same seat and watched your strange revels. Merciful God, you have kept me safe and alive for eighty eight years.

So far all my ten senses are functioning without fail.

Proprietor Sir, if I was not in good health, then at the age of eighty-eight I would have taken to bed.

Merciful Lord, provider of strength to the weak, saviour of the fallen, you have been so kind to this slave of yours, you have kept me safely alive for eighty eight years, what you are going to do with me in the end is known only to you. Dear Gourkishora, I humbly accept whatever you do to me but pray let me have a place at your feet when I breathe my last.

FOURTEENTH COMPOSITION

Blessed is the age of Kali for you
came to Nabadwip with all your followers—
you Gouranga the beautiful
A new feeling sweeps the tulsi forest of Mayapur
Because of you Gourkishora!
You left Nabadwip in the guise of an ascetic
and stayed near Jagannatha
Then secretly you left the place
Even the scriptures cannot fathom your ways
Unless you decide to tell
nobody has the power to know anything
When the world falls to pieces you manifest
your power as you are merciful and the
protector of the weak
In Mayapur you have reappeared as a young couple
This delights the devotees who are ecstatic,
they sing and dance in joy
You are unpredictable, you appear in
whatever form pleases you
Rassundari's only wish is to stay adhered to
your feet like sandalwood paste.

FIFTEENTH COMPOSITION

What a beautiful dream I have had tonight
I saw that I had gone to Vrindavana
I saw Krishna in the orchard
surrounded by the *gopis*.
He had his typical dress of Braja with a
garland of wild flowers round his neck
Your body has the charm of young clouds
And your beauty is more than ten million full moons
Your hair is tied in a garland of *malati* flowers
The Kaustubha gem lights up the entire spot
under the tree
The two eyes put lotuses to shame
On your sandal pasted body are ornaments
Your beauty has put even the heavenly
gandharvas to shame
This beauty is the most enticing thing in the world
I do not find any comparison.
Your lotus feet are like flowers
dropped from the moon
You strike a pose with Radha to your left
This is what your devotees like to see most
I saw the two of you in the form of young adolescents
I offered sandal paste, tulsi leaves and flowers
This dream made me very happy indeed
Merciful God, please grant the innermost wish of
Rassundari.

I was born in the year 1216 in the month of Chaitra and now in the year 1303 I am eighty eight years of age. Something of my physical and mental state as well as my entire life story till the age of sixty has been written. The story of the next twenty five years of my life should also be written. A little bit of my present state of health has also been written. There is nothing more to be said. The one who is always within my heart knows perfectly well how I

feel.

I have got more or less all that a householder is expected to get—some happiness as well as some misfortune. God has been kind enough to grant me earthly assets—sons, daughters, grandchildren—he has also taken some of them. I had given birth to twelve children—ten sons and two daughters. Out of those God has shown me seven—six sons and one daughter—before he took them away. He has kept the rest before me—four sons and one daughter for me to see.

The story of my life—the second part ends here. If any member of my family wishes to complete the last part, he or she may do so after my death.

This book is written by my own hand. I am not literate in the real sense. Do not neglect it, my dear readers, do not look down upon it. I need not elaborate. You are aware of everything so please do the needful so that my labour is rewarded.

If this book of mine is printed then the money left after paying the printing cost should be kept aside. I know my sons well enough. Even afterwards whoever is present in the family should use the money in organising a celebration before Madangopal a this is my ernest desire.

Advice to the Mind

O mind of mine, I belong to you, you are
very close to me
You have the strongest influence on me,
the rest of the body is fragile
That I have come to this world is only because
I have faith in you
The time here is spent in useless games
in this marketplace of the world.
Just think that the wealth and the people
you hold so dear will be left behind
You have come alone and when you

leave nobody will be there.
Your family which you have nursed since birth
None of them will accompany you when
you start for Death's domain.
People and wealth are mirages, you work only for others
If you have been fortunate to have a rare
human birth—do what is befitting.
The master of all creatures had ordained
during the time of coming
There are four jobs to be done after
you are born in Bharatavarsha.
Acquire knowledge, obey your guru
Listen to good words wherever you can
Be gracious to your guests, feed them first
before you take your meal.
Do not speak anything but the truth
if you are called as witness
But I have done none of the four things
When asked this is what you will testify.
Don't you know you have to die as you are born
Like a fish is netted in a pond—in the pond of death
Then you will know nobody is your own,
none will die for you
As soon as you step out of the house Death
will tighten its noose
Friends and relations will urge you not to delay
Love goes with you, so please hurry
People are boastful of dress, jewelleries and ornaments
They are all as good as torn clothes
where will you keep them when leaving?
Now you are riding on the crest of love
with women all the time
When the time comes the bubble will burst,
so will the women you call your own.
Drunk with vanity you overlook the truth
This body is only transient, know this

as the only truth.
This body you care for will be reduced to ashes
Shame on those who fail to realise this,
It is only a waste of time to write of
such creatures in verses

All that I have to say is all your
schemes will come to nothing
All your expensive shawls will be left behind
all the elephants and horses
They will bid you goodbye placing you on a bamboo
cot in the burning ghat
Your sons and daughters will go home
leaving you on the pyre with logs and
grasses feeding the flame
The flame will be reduced to ashes soon enough
As you proceed towards the domain of death
only Time's policeman will go with you

The policeman will hit you with his baton
saying: Come along you sinner
You have to beg but you will be tied up
and rushed around.

Lift your eyes and you will find nobody around.
Oh my mind, for whom did I work all these years,
and what have I got in return

From where do I come, when am I taken there
People I thought to be my own are not with me
Big mansion, big rooms are all left behind.
After the fair gives over, everybody disperses
Brothers, relations, family all come with the property
In the last journey only Govinda is your companion
Wealth, men, children are of no use
Only Sri Madhusudana stays with you
in the time of death

O Saviour, Rassundari is worried to death
Do appear before her when her time comes at last.

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WRITERS WORKSHOP was founded in 1958. It consisted of a group of writers who agreed in principle that English had proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writing and transcreation from India, the Commonwealth, and other English-using territories. Discussions were held on Sunday mornings at 162/92 Lake Gardens, Kolkata, and diffusion done through books issued under the WORKSHOP imprint. Since 1971 the WORKSHOP laid increasing emphasis on its publishing programme. Since October 1999 the Sunday one-hour morning session was devoted to a śloka-by-śloka reading by P. Lal at the Sanskriti Sagar Library, of his complete English transcreation of the *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa. Since November 2010, P. Lal's son, Ananda Lal, directs the WORKSHOP.

The WORKSHOP is non-profit and non-political. It involves writers who are sympathetic to the ideals and principles commonly accepted as embodied in creative writing; it is concerned with practice not theorizing, helpful criticism not iconoclasm, the torch not the sceptre. Not impressed by desire for quick fame and money, WRITERS WORKSHOP upholds the primacy of stable ethical and moral values, and prefers writing that enshrines humanist principles, which are of special relevance in the context of the multi-cultural historical palimpsest of the civilization known as India.

Further details are available from the WORKSHOP address: 162/92 Lake Gardens, Kolkata 700045, India (E-mail: writersworkshopkolkata@gmail.com) and the WW website: www.writersworkshopindia.com

WRITERS WORKSHOP ~ A Credo by P. Lal

Glory be to Mahakala. It is now 2010. I am four score and two. Time for some home truths. Because writers workshop has close to 3500 separate titles in its checklist (published over 50 years 1958-2008 and because it has averaged around 100 titles each year since 1995, there is a misconception that it is an Indian publishing leviathan. (No other publisher in India has that many titles on its annual list.) The truth is much less awesome. writers workshop has no office; it operates from my residence, from the living room and a multi-purpose bedroom. It has no secretary; my "secretary" is a three-year Godrej filing cabinet. It has no editor, no "reader" to inspect, evaluate and OK typescripts. I do all this tasks. It has no proofreader; I perform the nitty-gritty of detailing, recasting and correcting. It has no "assistant" to acknowledge or follow up letters. I do all that too. It has no typewriter; I reply in longhand (from 2004, converting to the hi-tech convenience, I sometimes seek help from my computer expert grand-daughter Shabnam to e-mail replies to insistent and urgent enquiries for VWI information.) It has no retail or wholesale distribution "outlet"; there is only a cubby-hole of a block at my residence (not a less roughly) called the Book House, where a dedicated young assistant attends to intermittent sales of VWI books. The Lake Gardens block opened in 1958, 40 years after VWI's inception. Pooh! Bah! Humbug, if ever put.

How then has VWI survived? Without such foundations to back it, without advertisement, without large-hearted patrons? Initially, by the skin of our teeth (1958-1964). Then (1965-1990) by my visits to hard currency EU Countries, specially Great Britain, the USA and Australia on lecture assignments and selling printed writings on two dozen or so occasions, and pumping the dollars thus earned to keep it going at a jogging trot.

Alternative publishing is desperately needed wherever commercial publication rules. VWI is not a professional publishing house. It does not print well known names; it makes names known and well known, and then leaves them in the loving clutches of the so-called "free" market (which can be and very fickle and very expensive). It is the end of it is marvellous, to please, as publishers do, "I will not publish poetry because it does not sell." Most English book publishing today in Indian time India and outside is book-dumping. There is a nexus between high profile PR-conscious book publishers, some known booksellers, moribund public and state libraries, poorly informed and responsible undertakings, lounge of book reviews pages and supplements of most national newspapers and magazines, and last but not least producers of new worthless books by bureaucratic institutions set up — believe it or not — to educate, edify and excite the reading public. Wonders never cease.

I strongly believe that, instead of catering and pandering to existing lowest-common-denominator popular taste, a self respecting writer should create a literary taste by which he or she may be enjoyed by discriminating readers.

Because VWI goes in for serious creative writing, and because there is no satisfactory distribution outside the sub-continent, the terms of publication are unique. I must be the only publisher in the world who knows where and where every book is sold. I have the name and address of every buyer of a VWI book. Upon my acceptance of a typescript, an agreement form is sent to the writer. All copyrights remain with the writer. Poetry appears in VWI copies, price in US$ ten per copy (25 copies of the poetry book). Half the proceeds is given in lieu of royalty. The writer is also expected to make an advance purchase of 50 copies of his or her book, for sale or distribution as he or she pleases. Printing is done in Kolkata by small operated presses, situated in the residences of their owners. The whole process is a cottage industry with low key entrepreneurship, in the belief that small is not only beautiful but viable as well. Vanity or commercial publishing? Yes, I am humanly vain about it and I do sponsor what I think is good writing by boys of literature will refer to subsidize, with no strings attached, writing new work by talented Indian poets, fiction writers and belles lettres, please get in touch with me. The gesture will be acknowledged, appreciated, accepted, and implemented. Such Good Samaritan generosities, not market forces, are the root of civilized and significant publishing the world over. The Pharisees are neatly bypassed.

[P. Lal passed away on 3 November 2010]